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OLD DOUBLEDARK, THE WILY Detective



OR,
The Invisible Foe's Masquerade.

BY WM. H. MANNING,

AUTHOR OF "DEEP DUKE," "YANK YELLOW-BIRD," "BORDER BULLET," "WILD WEST WALT," "CENTRAL PACIFIC PAUL," "KANSAS KITTEN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A TRAP, AND WHAT IT CAUGHT.

THE men in the grove by the river had an appearance calculated to arouse suspicion in any mind. The night was not cold, but they had their coat-collars turned up, and the rims of their soft hats turned down, and their general aspect was rough and forbidding.

Closer scrutiny would have revealed the fact that each and all wore masks, and thus put the stamp of lawlessness upon themselves. It was no harmless masquerade, and the fact became apparent that mischief was contemplated.

The point was on the western bank of the Hudson River, a short distance above the city of New York. Standing on the bluff one could look south and see the lights of the American



DOUBLEDARK GAZED IN MOMENTARY DISMAY AT THE SECRET FOE'S MESSAGE.

Old Doubledark.

metropolis glistening through a stretch of miles, but there, as on the river-bank, crime flourished best in darkness.

The night was favorable for all kinds of crime. It was dark, and the masked men might have dispensed with their disguises without much danger.

One of their number lighted a match and looked at his watch.

"The time is almost at hand," he remarked, "and if nothing goes wrong we will soon have Old Doubledark in our hands. Let the plan be clearly understood. He is expected to come to the big rock above, in response to our decoy invitation. He expects to meet but one man, and Nobles will be there to do the proper caper. He will conduct the detective to this grove, on the plea of secrecy, and then we will all jump upon him."

"I am still o' the opinion that we ought ter use the knife, an' then sink him in the river," one of the other men answered, in a tone of dissatisfaction.

"You forget our promise."

"What difference would it make—an' the safest way is always the best!"

"We get a good sum for disposing of him in a certain way, and it's going to be done," responded the leader, authoritatively. "To resume: Having captured him, we then take a boat and row across the river. In the basement of an old deserted house a sort of dungeon has been prepared. We thrust Old Doubledark, bound and gagged, into that dungeon, and leave him to die of starvation. A very elaborate plan, I say!"

"Hang the elaborate plan!"

"Don't growl, Nelson. I can't say that I favor it, but I shall obey the man whose money we take. Anyhow, Old Doubledark is not after us."

"He's after everybody who tries ter git an honest livin' by preyin' on other folks, an' ef he slips out o' this net, nobody will hev more cause ter fear him than Miles Rogerson an' Company."

"He's not going to slip out, Nelson, so don't lament any more. We will gobble him, and we shall be all the safer in the work we have to do because he is out of the way. Nobles, go to the rock now, and mind that you do your work well."

"You kin trust me."

With this terse reply the man walked away, and his confederates concealed themselves in bushes, and behind the trees, to await the next act in the drama.

Fifteen minutes passed, and then a word of warning was sounded. Two men were seen approaching, and the evil-doers in ambush became as still as death.

The extreme darkness prevented any accurate survey of the advancing couple, but it was not needed. They did not fear to pounce upon the wrong parties—although none of them knew "Old Doubledark" by sight—for it had been agreed upon that if Nobles met his man he should, upon reaching the ambush, wave a handkerchief ostentatiously.

Side by side the parties to this scheme advanced, and the decoyed detective was soon in the midst of his enemies. The latter watched like vultures; then, suddenly, as a handkerchief was swung in air, they sprung upon their victim.

One muffled cry escaped his lips, but he was allowed to utter no more. Many hands were upon him, and in a short space of time he was securely bound and gagged.

"A complete success!" Miles Rogerson asserted, as they arose. "He has been nabbed without the least trouble or fear of exposure. Did he object to coming, Nobles?"

"Not a bit."

"Had to get the promised clew," laughed the leader. "He can see now what his infernal weakness for meddling has led him to. So may all police spies he served! Now, let's lose no time about this business. Carry him to the boat and flop him in!"

The prisoner was lifted and carried down the bank. A boat lay beached on the bank; it was shoved into the water and all entered, the bound man being laid flat on the bottom of the craft. He had renewed his struggles on the way, and thereby received several lusty blows. Plainly, he did not relish captivity.

"Oars, and row smartly!" commanded Rogerson. "It's as dark as a stack of black cats, but just the night to escape detection. Hullo! what's the racket?"

The prisoner had renewed his struggles, and his heavily-shod feet made a good deal of noise on the boat.

"Shut up that uproar!" commanded the leader.

Struggling certainly seemed useless, unless some other boat happened to be passing, but the bound man kept at it until Rogerson lost all patience. Drawing his revolver he struck the prisoner viciously on the head, and the instant cessation of his struggles indicated that he was stunned.

This just suited the captors, and they rowed rapidly across the river in a diagonal course. The eastern bank was soon reached, when they landed, lifted the captive and bore him away.

Only a few yards from the river was a big, ancient-looking building, and toward this they directed their steps. Rogerson carried a key; he used this and they entered. A light would then have been acceptable, but they did not dare to risk one. They knew the way, and, still bearing the bound man, they descended to the basement.

"Still unconscious?" asked Rogerson.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry for that, for I wanted to state what was ahead of him; but when he wakes up he will have a pretty fair idea of the situation, especially as time wears on. Eh, boys?"

"You bet!"

"Hunger and thirst will talk to him."

"I dare say it's a bit tough, but what more does he deserve? What's a detective, anyhow? A man who turns spy for money, and keeps honest dogs like us from collecting toll from the rich. 'Tis said that no rogue e'er felt the halter draw with good opinion of the law, and so of us. We can't esteem detectives while they molest us."

"This fellow is served right!" declared one of the subordinates.

"True; so chuck him into the dungeon and I'll lock the door. Exit Old Doubledark from the scenes of life!"

A portion of the basement was partitioned off into a strong room. Into this they carried their victim and dropped him on the floor.

The work was done and Rogerson did not see fit to delay. He locked the door of the "dungeon," and then they went up-stairs in darkness and silence. The prisoner was left to die of starvation, and as he was securely bound, there seemed no danger that their plans would miscarry.

Rogerson led the way out of the building, locking the front door after him.

"Here we separate," he answered, "and you may each go his way like a good citizen. Meet me to-morrow, and we will leave the city for our summer campaign in the Catskills. If any one of you knows a charming servant-girl—you would not know any other sort, I dare be sworn—tell her to advise her employer to carry all his valuables to his country quarters, for they may be stolen if left in town."

There was a general laugh at this remark.

"Up in the Catskills," added Rogerson, "all will be safe as mice!"

"Ay, ay, for we will have an eye on the valuables!"

Another laugh, and then this good-humored crowd of exemplary citizens said good-night and separated. They went to enjoy life in great Gotham, and, possibly, to utter more facetious remarks, reminiscent of the man they had left in the basement to starve.

Half an hour passed; then the stillness was broken by fresh sounds, and a man came clambering over the rubbish which surrounds the old building and approached the door. Once there he drew from his pocket a bunch of keys. One he fitted to the door, after which he unlocked it and entered.

Without hesitation he trod the way lately taken by Rogerson's party, and descended to the basement. When there he produced a dark-lantern and looked around until he found the door of the "dungeon." This done, he calmly unlocked it.

As the door swung back he entered. The sight of a man on the floor did not seem to surprise him, but that person wriggled actively and arose as much as possible. Unheeding this demonstration the visitor did several things with celerity. First, he cut the cords which bound the man's feet; next, he removed the gag from his mouth; and then he set him up against the wall.

"Here we are!" he observed coolly.

"For the Lord's sake!" exclaimed the prisoner, "who are you? Be you one o' the boys?"

"I am, and a great boy I am! Ever seen me before now?"

"I—I don't know."

"I fancy you have. I am the man for whom you are acting as substitute. I am Old Doubledark the detective!"

"Curse you!" exclaimed the prisoner, bitterly.

"You should bless me, rather. Except for my aid you would have stayed here to starve. I don't think that would be any great loss to the community, but it might have been to you. Besides, I want you!"

"You are the Evil One!"

"Wrong! I am merely a man with brains enough to worst a lot of lubbers like Miles Rogerson and his gang. You laid a plot to trap me, and expected me to walk into the net like a silly fly. I must say you were a stupid lot!"

"I always heard you had the cunnin' of Old Nick, an' now I know it."

"You know nothing of the sort. What you term my 'cunning' is only common sense. When I was promised great secrets if I would go to a lonely place, I suspected a trap; I investigated and found it. I was in the grove tonight when Rogerson was giving directions to his men, and heard the whole thing arranged. When you started for the big rock, Nobles, I started too; and the fact that I came so docilely

to the grove again may be accounted for on the basis that I had resolved to wave a handkerchief before you could. I did so, and you were seized, not I!"

"It is your villainous luck!" groaned Nobles; "but nobody else could have done it."

"Oh, it was nothing; the extreme darkness was in my favor; one couldn't tell friend from foe there. Really, though, Nobles, it was a source of amusement to me to imagine how dumfounded your friends would be if they knew it was you who lay bound in the boat, while Old Doubledark rode serenely with them in your place."

"They were cursed fools!" cried Nobles, hotly.

"They were a trifle stupid, I'll admit. Well, enough of that. I don't intend to starve you, Nobles."

"What then?"

"Oh! we'll go to Police Headquarters."

"I expected it."

"Your fate is in your own hands."

"How?"

"Confession will do you a heap of good."

"What d'ye want ter know?"

"What is the game that is being steered by Miles Rogerson and his men?"

"You won't learn from me."

"No?"

"I'll see you hanged afore I tell."

"I'm afraid you won't, Nobles; but as to the confession, you may do as you please. You can lighten your own trouble by owning up like a man, but I have clew enough to help me out, anyhow. Suit yourself as to the confession."

"Not a word will I say."

"All right; but I shall go for the gang just the same, and I shall wind them up. Men have seen fit to call me 'Doubledark,' assuming that I am more cunning than the run of men. Some, indeed, have also dubbed me 'The Wily Detective.' All this is nonsense, for I am not wily, nor deep, nor shrewd; I am only persevering. Well, being a persevering man, I am going to run down your gang."

With one motion of his muscular arm the detective set Nobles upon his feet.

"March to Police Headquarters," he added, with calm brevity.

Nobles muttered a curse through his teeth, but his rage was impotent. Old Doubledark had him fast, and he felt the folly of resistance. Sullenly he allowed himself to be led from the house, and not for a long time did he expect freedom again.

CHAPTER II.

THE DETECTIVE GIVES AN ALARM.

SUMMIT VIEW was one of the finest of the many fine summer houses for which the Catskills long ago acquired deserved renown. Erected by a gentleman of wealth and good taste, it possessed attractions too numerous to be enumerated, both as to the house, itself, and the grounds which surrounded it—the latter being a wide wilderness of massive trees, flowers and ornamental shrubs. The location was the west bank of the Hudson River.

One afternoon Mr. Edward Wayne, the owner of the mansion, was walking in the remotest part of the grounds when he was accosted by a second gentleman. He recognized the newcomer at once as Gordon Brentwood, the tenant of a cottage a short distance to the north. The men had become somewhat acquainted since they first became neighbors, a month before, and Brentwood, who was a student, had often enjoyed the privileges of Wayne's library.

They now met with a friendly hand-shaking.

"You're a stranger, Brentwood!" observed the master of Summit View. "I haven't seen you for a week."

"I've been away. I have to run down to New York once in awhile."

"You ought to be like me—able to drop all your cares in this glorious summer-time," said Wayne, smiling.

"A desirable thing, I confess."

"We are all indolent fellows here, and in this retired place we live for weeks, disdaining society and business, with no one to molest or make us afraid."

"Humph! Are you quite sure of that?"

"Of what?"

"That there is no one to molest you?"

"I had thought so. Can you prove to the contrary?"

"Mr. Wayne, suppose we sit down. I am over to-day on business, not to delve in your books. I dare say you will excuse me for throwing a bombshell into your camp, if I do it for your good."

The gravity of the speaker's manner impressed Mr. Wayne considerably, and he led the way to a rustic bench where they could talk at ease.

There was a noticeable difference in the appearance of the two. Wayne was a man of about sixty-five years, pleasant, courteous, intelligent and refined; but he was delicately formed and, despite his intelligence, not a man of strong will. By nature he was indolent, and this characteristic had never been overcome.

Brentwood's age was not easy to surmise. He might have been forty, and he might have been past fifty, but a candid estimate would place

him at about forty-six. He would weigh one hundred and eighty pounds, and it was apparent that bone and muscle entered largely into this figure. Beyond doubt, he was far stronger than the average of men.

Although well-dressed, he lacked the aristocratic air which marked Wayne's appearance. His hair and beard were both long and neglected, and his face was keen and sagacious rather than intellectual. It was a strong face, however, and the most casual observation would not fail to detect evidence of a determined will.

This gentleman sat calmly down and faced his companion.

"Mr. Wayne, can you keep a secret?" he asked, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I think so," was the smiling reply.

"So do I, or I should not trust you with one. Such being the case, I will come right to business. Danger is hovering over Summit View."

"Danger! What kind of danger?"

"That I don't know, exactly. I can only tell you that you, or some one else, or your property, is menaced. In order to explain how I know this, I must go further with my confidence. You have known me only as a man who has fled from New York to escape the heat of summer, and has hired a cottage near here, I am more; I am a detective!"

This announcement was quietly made, but Wayne looked at him in amazement.

"You, a detective!"

"Yes."

"Then what in the world are you doing here? Excuse me, but—"

"Do not apologize; let me talk. I am not in favor of unnecessary words at any time, so let me avoid them here. I am going to be frank with you, sir, and I hope you will meet me in the same way."

"My name is not Gordon Brentwood, at all, though you will please continue to call me so. I am a New York detective, and, when there, am known by the fanciful sobriquet of 'Old Doubledark.' Some time ago, in the discharge of my duty, I became aware that a gang of criminals, led by one Miles Rogerson, purposed to descend upon the rich dwellers among the Catskills, this summer, for booty. Obviously, money and jewels were their main objects.

"With the hope of heading them off, and spurred on by a blow they had aimed at me, I at once engaged the cottage to the north of your premises, sunk my identity, became plain Gordon Brentwood, and set out to watch and foil them.

"Robberies, however, have been scarce, and I am now of the opinion that something has occurred to change their plans, and that, instead of numerous 'breaks,' with comparatively small gains, a scheme is on foot to make *you*, or your house, contribute all the toll they want.

"During the week I have been away I captured a man in the act of burglarizing a house twenty miles north of here. I knew him to be one of Rogerson's gang, and after a good deal of effort, I got him to talk freely.

"He told me that, much to the dissatisfaction of the gang, Rogerson had changed his plans. Instead of keeping together and working directly under his orders, they had been scattered and told to work in pairs on their own judgment. It looked, he said, as though Rogerson had abandoned them.

"It was the opinion of the men that their leader had found a more profitable, or pleasant, way of earning money; a game which he could work alone; and, as a consequence, he wanted to be free from his followers, but dared not cast them off, wholly. My prisoner was sour on Rogerson and he gave his own opinion freely.

"Once, before the leader began to whittle, a note in his book had been seen by my prisoner. As near as he could remember the brief record, it ran thus:

"Residence of Edward Wayne, called Summit View; a big boodle to be had, and easily worked; the other party in the household, itself; no danger and great gain."

"All this was suggestive, but there was more. When urged by one of his men to work actively with them, Rogerson, not being aware of the clew gained from his note, as above, made reply:

"I can do better where I am. I'm now domiciled with a rich family in the Catskills, and I don't want to leave until we get the boodle."

"What do you make of that, Mr. Wayne?"

The master of Summit View answered in astonishment:

"Surely, you don't think he referred to *this* house?"

"But I do!" Old Doubledark replied, calmly.

"The idea is absurd."

"Why?"

"My guests are all gentlemen—"

"Name them!"

"You have met them. My brother, ex-Judge Wayne, and his daughter, Estelle; Allen Marlowe and Doctor George Everton; the Misses Clara and Eddila Raynor; and Hugh Warburton, who arrived to-day. You haven't seen him, I think."

"Leave Warburton out; it was some weeks ago that Rogerson announced himself so pleasantly 'domiciled.' Of course, too, your hon-

ored brother is exempt. We now come to Marlowe and Everton, who are the only men we can suspect."

"Great heavens! we can't suspect *them*. Both are men of excellent family, and we have known them a long while. Marlowe, in particular, is a man I highly esteem, and Everton is all well enough, though not a favorite with me. As for Warburton, our new-comer, Marlowe vouches for him. They are bosom friends, and Warburton was asked here at a late date, at my request, by Marlowe to make up round numbers."

"He does not interest me; it is those who have been with you some time."

"Why, see here, Brentwood, why don't you bring your captive burglar here to recognize his chief?"

"A good idea if it would work, but it will not. Mr. Miles Rogerson was a long-headed knave, and not one of his gang knew how he really looked. As a chief he was almost an invisible power. He never showed himself to his men except at night, and then in disguise. My prisoner said he would be old and lean on one occasion, and young and fleshy the next time."

"A long-headed fellow!"

"Decidedly. Well, this man, who can be recognized by no common means, is with or near you. He has marked you for his prey, and he will accomplish the work unless we head him off."

Wayne looked at his companion in bewilderment.

"This seems almost incredible."

"Nothing is incredible in criminal life."

"What is to be done?"

"Now you talk business," Old Doubledark calmly replied. "We must catch him!"

"How?"

"By putting cunning against cunning."

"Possibly you know how, but I don't."

"We must wait and watch; the fellow will show his hand, whether he be a member of your household or not."

"I must protest against putting Marlowe or Everton under suspicion."

"Quite right; that is your privilege; but if you find that either is planning to rob you, I don't suppose you will object to seeing him brought up in his career?"

"Why, as to that, I uphold no criminal."

"Exactly. Now, you ask how we are to work. I reply that, if it will not displease you, I wish to be at your house more. Several times I have had the privilege of your library. Really, I cared nothing for the books; I was on the watch. I have now taken you into my confidence because your safety demanded it; but I want more extensive use of your books."

"You are very welcome to them, sir."

"At this time let me pause and convince you that I am what I claim to be—a detective. I can show you numerous official papers—"

"It is not necessary."

"It is very necessary," calmly declared Old Doubledark. "Wise men do not believe blindfolded; you must be placed where you will have no doubts."

With this assertion the detective produced a package of papers. Wayne was not familiar with police business, but he gave careful attention to the documents and was convinced beyond power of doubt.

This done, Old Doubledark put the evidence away and rose from the bench.

"I'm going to my cottage now," he announced, "but you shall see me again; I shall drop over to see those books, and to watch other things. I advise you to do the same. Your safety demands it."

"You have mixed me all up," Wayne confessed.

"Naturally, for the news came to you suddenly, but don't let that put you off your guard. Bear in mind that a danger is hovering over you, vague and shadowy, but not the less real. Your enemy is in ambush, but he means business."

"It is not an agreeable sensation to be menaced by an invisible danger," gravely observed Wayne.

"You are right. Nobody likes to have a secret foe haunting him; though, as for me, it stimulates my professional zeal. Unless our man gets frightened off, we are bound to have him. Like him, I am a man of disguises, and it's a safe bet of fifty to one he don't know how I look and can't recognize me here. He and I meet on equal terms; now let us see who shall win!"

CHAPTER III. OLD DOUBLEDARK LISTENS.

THE master of Summit View had heard so much in a few minutes that he was considerably confused, but Old Doubledark was as calm as ever. Keeping his assumed character carefully in view he strolled away with his hands crossed behind his back, and his head lowered in thought, as a student might do.

The lofty trees which distinguished Mr. Wayne's grounds stretched for some distance, and the detective had gone several rods, but was still within the grounds, when he saw two young men approaching side by side. One, he

immediately recognized as Allen Marlowe; the other he believed to be Marlowe's friend, Hugh Warburton.

He had not been observed by them, and, following an impulse, he stepped behind a tree where he would be invisible when they passed by. His only idea was to watch and study them, but chance was playing into his hands.

They were moving slowly, and when only a few steps distant, Marlowe paused.

"We are now alone, Hugh," he said, eagerly, "and as I am burning to have a talk with you, I will improve the chance."

Old Doubledark nodded slightly; he approved of the idea, and intended to overhear all he could. There was no fear that his conscience would reproach him; it was a part of his trade to listen to what others said. If it proved to be trivial it was safe with him, and would not be repeated; but if it was the secret of an evildoer, Old Doubledark did not forget the claims of law.

He was now observing the young men closely, trying to read their natures and, as far as possible, their very thoughts.

Almost any other person would have said they were not men open to suspicion. In appearance they were gentlemanly, frank, open and manly, and they would have been likely to make friends almost anywhere. Marlowe was the better looking, while Warburton gave evidence of a strong, well-balanced mind which every one could not equal.

To his friend's last remark he replied:

"I shall be glad to hear you, Allen."

"You have come to me in a time of profound trouble," Marlowe went on, with an air of dejection, "and I have summoned you because I need help; because I naturally turn to my best friend in such a crisis; and because I know how discerning you are."

"Whatever I can do shall be gladly done," Warburton earnestly returned.

"In olden times I used to take pleasure in hearing you analyze people. You have now seen Estelle; tell me just what you think of her."

"I have grown to mistrust my powers of analysis; to think that I was foolish in those days. Yet, in regard to Miss Wayne, I feel that I cannot be mistaken."

"Tell me what you think of her."

"She is a remarkable woman," Warburton answered. "Her mental gifts are wonderful. Gracious, kind, dignified, and capable of deep and abiding affection, all pale before a rare quality of mind. Were her father still in political life, she would be an invaluable ally. She could read men; she could bend them to her will. She could discover the intricate depths of every situation, and by tact which would be resistless, turn all to her own purpose. Vast influence is hers, and she knows her power, yet she would never use it dishonorably; and in all things she would be refined and womanly, capable of undying devotion, self-sacrifice and loyalty. This, Allen, may sound over-drawn, but it is my candid opinion."

Warburton spoke with an air of frankness, and Marlowe warmly grasped his hand.

"I thank you most heartily, and if I were wavering in my faith, I should be strengthened; but I cannot, will not doubt her."

"You are the same Allen as of old."

"My only hope now is to have faith; it is all that is left me. Well, as to my story. I gave you a partial account in my letter; you shall now know more."

"I first met Estelle Wayne when we were less than twenty years old, and then only for a few weeks, but I admired her greatly even then. This summer, when I was invited here by Mr. Edward Wayne—my father's old friend—I met her again. Her father, the ex-judge, has been a noted man in legal and political life, but his mental powers have failed sadly in his old age; the ex-judge is a mental wreck."

"When I came here two things at once impressed me—first, Estelle's devotion to her father; secondly, her rare beauty, grace and goodness. Her influence over me was irresistible; I began by admiring and ended by loving her. Let me pass briefly over that; it is enough to say that, one bright evening, we walked under the long line of maple trees fantastically called 'The Ghost's Walk,' and I asked her to be my wife. Her reply was favorable."

"Days and weeks of happiness followed, but a change was at hand. I remember the first shadow of trouble. The evening mail had come, and as I had no letters, I idly watched as she read one of her own. The result startled me; I saw the color flee from her cheeks and a startled look appear in her eyes; then she excused herself and left the room."

"She came to us no more that night, but we received word that she had a headache. This did not satisfy me; I was worried, and, though she was as calm as ever the next morning, I questioned her. She assumed a look of surprise and declared that I was wholly wrong; that she had received no ill news."

"Two days passed, and then she sought an interview with me, and asked that our engagement—which, by her request, had been kept secret—be postponed. I asked for her reason; she gave none. I asked for the duration of the

postponement; she answered that it must be indefinite. I was startled; but she seemed as much troubled as I, and I had to let it drop when she kindly, but firmly, told me that she could give no explanations then.

"Several more days passed—to me, days of misery.

"One night I wandered alone under the stars until a late hour, hovering about the river and smoking constantly to drown the pangs of thought. Finally, however, when the hour approached midnight, I started to return.

"My way lay near that end of the house where I knew Estelle's room was situated, and, though I was outside the grounds—at this point some thirty rods wide—which surrounded the mansion, I looked to see if all was dark and still.

"No! A light still burned, and, plainly revealed, there stood Estelle at the window, dressed as I had seen her at dinner, and looking out into the night—not straight ahead, but downward.

"Instinctively I glanced the same way, and there—my reason almost reels at recollection of what I saw.

"Warburton, some dark object was dangling between air and earth, suspended by I could not tell what, and looking so strange and incomprehensible that I rubbed my eyes to make sure that it was not an illusion.

"But no; there it remained, dangling in air; but as it rapidly neared the ground, a terrible suspicion flashed upon me. With a cry of anger and pain I sprung over the fence and ran through the intervening bushes—no easy task, in the night, and it was not until I had once fallen and made a good deal of noise that I emerged and stood beside the house.

"I looked for the dark object which had dangled in the air. It was gone! I glanced up at Estelle's window. It was closed, and all was dark inside the chamber.

"Dazed and uncertain, I stood inactive for several seconds. Had I imagined all this? Did the suggestive scene exist only in my mind? No, the most liberal use of faith could not make me accept this explanation; I had seen Estelle at her window, and I had seen—how could I interpret it, except by saying that I had seen some one descending from the window by a rope?

"A jealous fury seized me, and I rushed away to find the person. I searched long and carefully; I found no one, nor did I find sign that any one had been there.

"The darkness continued in Estelle's room, and she, like all the rest of the household, seemed asleep.

"I was still confused, but of one thing I was doggedly certain; I had seen all I have described and it stung me almost to madness. Who could put a charitable construction upon such an occurrence?

"But as I reflected further, the difficulty of such a journey in mid-air as I believed some one had taken, occurred to me. No one but a practical acrobat can descend a rope, hand under hand, in safety, and this object which I had seen had dangled as lightly as a feather. I tried to convince myself that it was not a human being, but—the evidence of my own eyes was against me.

"That night I slept but little. I was tormented by fears which cut to my heart. I did not wonder then that men sometimes go mad.

"Estelle was not at breakfast the next morning, but, shortly after, I was told by a servant that she wished to see me in the parlor. I went—and this is what happened:

"Calmly, yet kindly, Estelle stated that she wished to be released from her pledge to me; that she wished our engagement canceled.

"I shall go mad if I linger on this subject. How I pleaded, begged for explanations and argued I need not tell; that much you can surmise. But though she refused an explanation, and with a trembling voice besought me to always think well of her, she was firm in her position. She canceled the engagement.

"I did not tell her what I had seen the previous evening. I could not; it would be an insult to one in whom I trusted fully, and, in her loved presence, I was ready to believe I had imagined the swinging object in mid-air.

"What am I to think? What am I to do? She says all is over between us, yet it was said with trembling voice and lip. I am sure she suffered as much as I, but her self-control is wonderful. She says all is over, but I love her still, and I will not abandon hope.

"But there is something here which I cannot understand. Her course, and the object which swung from the rope, are mysteries which partake of the weird and unfathomable, but fathomed they shall be if it lies in my power.

"Why has she broken off our betrothal? I think—nay, I know—that she loves me as much as ever."

CHAPTER IV.

A SURLY FELLOW WITH A GRUDGE.

TOWARD the end of his statement Marlowe had grown greatly excited, but he finally curbed his feelings abruptly and, relapsing into silence, stood quietly before his friend.

Old Doubledark, who had listened with great

interest, stood behind the tree like a statue, wholly unsuspected.

"Believe me, Allen," answered Hugh Warburton, very earnestly, "you have my deepest sympathy."

"I know that, Hugh. I wrote you to come here because you were my best friend. I knew you were to be trusted implicitly, and I wanted your strong mind bent analytically upon the mystery. Now, what do you see?"

"Clearly, Estelle is not trifling with you. That is not her way. The course of events worries her as much as it does you, and, plainly, she is in deep trouble."

"Yes; and it began with the mysterious letter. She received bad news then, and its effects remain. Her self-control is remarkable, and no one else has seen that she is in trouble, but, despite her denials that there is anything wrong, she betrayed her own sorrow when she asked, first, for a postponement, and then for a breaking of our engagement."

"And she will give no reasons?"

"None whatever. She says there is a good reason, but she will not say what it is."

Warburton stood in an attitude of deep thought, and a short silence followed. Then Marlowe added:

"As you do not seem to have gained any idea from what I have told—all of which was outlined in my letter—I will add two items of evidence which have come before me to-day—since your arrival, in fact.

"A few hours ago I was talking with Edward Wayne when we saw Estelle and Doctor Everton walking a few rods away. They were talking earnestly, and she was looking up into his face with a bright smile. Mr. Wayne frowned slightly, and observed that he hoped she was not taking a fancy to Everton. I made some casual reply, when he added that it would not be the first time their names had been associated."

"Indeed!"

"Wait, Hugh! They had known each other in former years, and there was once a rumor that they were married. I need not say how absurd it was when I add that Estelle was then only fifteen years old. Judge Wayne laughed at the idea at the time, which would seem to settle it. The only unfavorable point is that when Everton was asked here this summer, it was at Estelle's request."

"This turns suspicion upon Everton."

"Yes; but I do not believe in it much. Had Estelle cared for him she would never have professed to care for me; had she decided to cast me off for another, she would have said so frankly."

"Well argued."

"Now for the second incident. A little over an hour ago, while you were in-doors, I was walking alone in the grounds when I was approached by a rough, shabbily-dressed, ill-looking fellow who seemed out of place anywhere but in a prison. His manner was easy and confident, and he at once asked: 'Young feller, where's Estelle Wayne?' His impudent, familiar way of using her name angered me, and I answered curtly that I did not know, adding that if he inquired further he would do well to use more respect when mentioning her."

"I then walked on, but I had not seen the last of him. Shortly after I came upon Estelle sitting on one of the rustic benches, while at the other end the vagabond laughed with lazy impudence. They were talking—she, earnestly and, I thought, almost imploringly; he, with cool indifference. As a whole, it appeared to me that she was a petitioner, while he had no sympathy to give.

"My appearance broke up the interview, and he arose and lounged past me with the insolent remark that if I scorned him, the 'fair damsel did not.'

"I made no answer, but, as he departed from the grounds, sought Estelle. She is noted for her charities; I thought he might have been a pensioner, though a most unworthy one. I questioned her; she tried to laugh the matter down; and it was not until I asked if he was one of her pensioners that she caught at the idea. In an indirect way, she said that he was.

"Plainly, indeed, I saw that she was resorting to evasion, and as I remembered the imploring expression upon her face, while she was talking with him, I asked if she was in trouble. Looking surprised, she said she was not. Dissatisfied, I persisted in the subject, but only drew from her a reproof; she accused me of annoying her—I would make any sacrifice for her!"

"She evidently wanted the subject dropped," suggested Warburton.

"She did, and I obeyed. I had to, for Everton and Miss Raynor came up just then. I know, however, that the ragged man was there as her enemy. Now, who and what is he, and why was he there?"

"Perhaps he was a pensioner, but one who had worn out her patience."

Marlowe shook his head.

"That was not it. He frightened and worried her."

"I am reminded of the object you saw dangling from the window."

"Don't mention that in connection with our man of rags!" quickly returned Marlowe.

"Whatever that thing was, it was not our ruf-

fian. If we infer that it was a living thing, let us remember that Estelle has a maid. Of course the maid has friends. In any case, rest assured that the strange object may be explained without dishonor to Estelle. She is above suspicion."

"She is an estimable lady, I dare be sworn!" declared Warburton.

"Thank you, old friend: but how do you explain all these mysteries?"

"You must give me time," was the thoughtful reply. "Assuming that Estelle is not a woman to indulge in the vagaries for which her sex are noted, we are left wholly in the dark. It would be folly to try to guess our way out. Let us, rather, observe and draw our conclusions."

Marlowe appeared reluctant to accept this reply as conclusive, but he could not deny that it was the best that could logically be given. If he, having been upon the ground and observed all, could form no theory as to the mystery, it was not to be expected that Hugh could, merely by hearing the evidence.

He acquiesced as cheerfully as possible in his friend's verdict, and then looking at his watch, suggested that they return to the house.

They went, and Old Doubledark heard no more. The detective remained behind the tree until they had disappeared behind the shrubbery, and then strolled quietly away.

He had heard enough to furnish food for thought.

"So young Marlowe is in trouble, eh?" he thought. "The course of love, true or otherwise, does not run smoothly. Humph! I usually detest love affairs, but this one positively interests me. It is charming!"

A cynical smile came to the detective's grim face.

"Usually, I would cast this matter aside as I would a child's toy, but, as I am ignorant of how Miles Rogerson intends to descend, Assyrian-like, upon the fold, I must ignore nothing. This sighing, lamenting lover interests me, by George! As for a theory, I could supply one which was not mentioned by our young men!"

Old Doubledark had reached the limits of the Wayne grounds, and he paused to light a cigar. Before that time the sun had gone down behind the green-topped points of the Catskills, and it was nearly dark. The detective ground the match under his foot.

"If," he added, pursuing his newspaper conjectures, "Allen Marlowe is Miles Rogerson, and Estelle has learned the fact, there we have a reason for her conduct. Say that she loves Marlowe, but does not want to marry a knave, even though she has pity for him. Would that give us a theory? It would. Marlowe may be Rogerson!"

The detective blew a comet-like point of smoke upward.

"And then again he may not. He does not look like a thief and rascal. I mistrust that Doctor Everton a trifle. Rumored that he was married to Estelle years ago, eh? Doubtful, very! Dark objects dangled from the window, eh? May have been a servant's contribution to poor relatives. Servants will steal. All things can be explained, and so shall the mystery of Miles Rogerson. Let him menace Summit View ever so obscurely, I shall put my thumb upon and crush him. Else why am I named Old Doubledark?"

He smiled again in his cynical way as he asked the last question. This man, whom all others delighted to credit with being shrewd and wily beyond the average of detectives, did not believe in his own reputation.

He asserted that what success he achieved came of hard work, and if he made a correct guess in a case, why, it was simply good luck.

Results determine all things, and, by hook or by crook, Old Doubledark was generally a winner, modest and cynical though he might be.

He now left the Wayne grounds and walked toward his own cottage. The way was through a sparse wood, or grove, and under the shadow of the trees it was almost wholly dark. The detective did not expect to encounter any one there, and had no thought of danger, but his hearing was acute, and when he suddenly detected the sound of soft footsteps he turned suddenly.

Another man had come to a halt only a few feet away, and circumstances led Old Doubledark to believe that he had made an attempt to steal upon him unseen.

"Well, what's wanted?" he asked, sharply.

"Who ye talkin' to?" returned the unknown, surlily.

"To you."

"I don't want nothin'."

"Why are you skulking around here, then?"

"I guess this earth is free ter all."

"That's where you are wrong. You are on private property, of which I now have charge. Being here, you are a trespasser. I am not inclined to be hard on an honest man—perhaps you can tell me who you are."

"You wouldn't need ter ask ef you knowed me as well as I do you."

"Humph! Who am I?"

"A detective!"

Old Doubledark's brows contracted. Here was danger to his plans, if not to himself. A man who knew his secret—knew him to be, not Brentwood, the book-worm, but a detective—was one in whom the success of the war against Miles Rogerson was endangered.

Once let it go abroad that he was in the Secret Service, and the plotters against Summit View would never be caught.

"Who are you who knows so much?" the detective asked.

"Look at me an' see."

"Did I ever see you before?"

"No."

"Do you live around here?"

"Just now I do."

"Perhaps you will walk into the house and talk it over with me?"

"More likely I won't; we'llhev it out here. I've got business with ye, mister. You're in my way."

The speaker's voice had grown deep and ominous, and Doubledark knew he had met a man who, from some motive, was a dangerous enemy.

"How am I in your way?" was the quiet inquiry.

"Because you're a sneakin' spy!"

"Have I spied upon you?"

"Whatever you've done, it's about over now. We ain't met here by chance, mister; I've b'en lookin' for ye, an' I've found ye. Now, we'llhev it out. One on us has got ter die, an' that one ain't me!"

"If I understand you clearly, you propose to kill me?"

Old Doubledark's voice had never been calmer than then.

"That's it, exactly."

"Naturally, I have some interest in this proceeding. Fray, how are you going to accomplish the job?"

"Let this be my answer!"

The hand of the stranger had been held near his pocket, and he now suddenly drew a revolver and turned it upon Doubledark.

CHAPTER V.

A STARTLING CRY AT MIDNIGHT.

THAT evening was passed quietly indoors by the guests at Summit View. Judge Wayne, alone, retired early, but this was rendered necessary by the state of his health. He was a man of large figure, and had once been very strong physically, but body and mind were giving way together, and he was a combination of invalid and child in manner.

He was still of impressive appearance, and his broad, firm face, with its adjuncts of snow-white hair and mustache, recalled the days when he had been a legal and political power, and a leader of men. Great had been his influence then, but the days were gone forever.

Of the other guests, Clara and Eddila Raynor were pretty, accomplished girls, who had never risen much above mediocrity, and never would.

Doctor Everton was worthy of notice. He was a man of moderately good appearance and gentlemanly manners. His expression was stolid, but it was clear that strong passions lay under the surface. There are men in all ranks of life who may well be watched. Reserved and confident, they are not easily read, and may be saints or sinners. Such a man was George Everton.

As usual, the bright particular star was Estelle Wayne. Description would fail to properly portray such a woman, and she need be given but brief space.

She was tall and queenly, and every motion was full of grace. Her most trifling actions were full of that rare quality. She did all things well, and other women had been jealous before then even before she spoke. When they heard her voice, it was even worse. Its melody could not be excelled. Nature had done its utmost for her—and she was a woman of the world, besides.

That evening she was fully herself. Her composure was perfect, her happiness seemingly unclouded. Her manner was full of gayety, which was never extreme or thoughtless, and which never gave any one vexation. She was one of those rare persons who can indulge in repartee and retort without being rude, and she was seen at her best that evening.

Allen Marlowe had but little to say, though he listened eagerly to her, while Hugh Warburton, usually not a great talker, purposely put himself forward and, as Allen could plainly see, studied Estelle carefully.

When the friends were alone, after the party separated for the night, Allen questioned Hugh eagerly.

"What do you think now?"

Warburton shook his head.

"Too early for a definite opinion. Don't hurry me, but let me be sure of my position when I speak. One thing I will venture to say."

"What is that?"

"Everton fancies Miss Wayne!"

A shadow of jealousy crossed Allen's face.

"What of her?" he asked.

"I can see no sign that she reciprocates."

"One consolation, at least."

"Also, I believe she still regards you kindly."

That is the way I interpreted her glances toward you."

"She may be playing a part."

"True; but I do not place much faith in Edward Wayne's belief that she is interested in Everton. She is polite and friendly to him; no more."

"Likewise, he would not need to employ the ragged ruffian, of whom I told you, as a messenger."

"We had better dismiss the ragged ruffian. I believe he was a pensioner, and nothing else. Ladies do not always bestow alms wisely, and she may think him unfortunate and fail to see his evil points."

"But I am sure she was pleading with him, and that she was in trouble. I can't dismiss the idea that that man was her enemy, and that trouble is to come through him."

"Go slowly, Allen; do not get your mind fixed in any one channel. As for your ruffian, we will look him up and see who and what he is."

There was wisdom in all that Hugh advised, and, realizing this, Marlowe tried to be content to let him have his own way. The latter was in a happy mood when they bade each other good-night, but a change came when Allen was alone.

Thought became active, and he could not command sleep. He tossed restlessly on the bed for two hours, and then arose in disgust, dressed, went out of the house, and, after lighting a cigar, began to walk through the grounds.

Half-unconsciously he wandered to the bench where he had talked with Estelle after the "ragged ruffian" had left her, and there he sat down. As he did so he saw something white on the ground near his feet. He picked it up and found it to be a fragment of letter-paper.

Mechanically he lighted a match and looked at it. There was writing there, and, though very stiff and awkward, it was sufficiently plain to be deciphered easily. Before the light of the match died out he had read the brief note.

"Come to Neil Kenney's cottage at twelve, tonight. This is imperative and must not be disregarded, but you will be as safe as though at Summit View. The bearer will tell you what else you need to know. SIROCCO."

A jealous mind reasons rapidly, and as Allen remembered the rough visitor of the afternoon, he rushed to a conclusion. The note was written to Estelle; it had been brought by the ragged man, and, afterward, lost by her; and it was she who had been asked—no, commanded—to go to Neil Kenney's.

He knew where that was. Across the Hudson River, which washed one side of Wayne's possessions, a small house was barely visible among the trees; and there, he had been told, dwelt a family named Kenney, of whom the father was a blacksmith in the village below, and all were said to be wild, ignorant, surly, barbarous persons.

Not for a moment did Allen doubt that the letter was addressed to Estelle, and at the thought of her going at night among such people, he started excitedly to his feet.

"She is in peril—what peril, my feeble wisdom cannot fully imagine—and though the commands of uncounted people held me back, I would not stand here in idleness. Has she gone? I feel sure she has gone, but, if so, one of the boats will be missing."

With rapid steps he made his way to the river-bank.

There rocked two boats, all that belonged to Mr. Wayne.

For a moment Marlowe was at fault, but he remembered that some one might have crossed from the other side for her. Again he struck a match and eagerly utilized its transient gleam. As he had expected, he found not only a lady's footprints in the moist soil, but, just beyond, was the mark made by a boat recently driven aground and then shoved off with an oar.

"The last doubt is gone!" he exclaimed. "She has crossed, and I will follow. Merciful Providence! she must be mad to trust herself among those barbarians."

He had cast off the painter of the small boat; he now leaped in and began rowing away with feverish energy.

The river was broad, and, before he reached the other bank, he had time to mentally ask the question, Who had summoned her to this untimely interview?

Who, indeed? By no flight of fancy could he surmise. Clearly, it was not he who had brought the note, nor yet one of the Kenneys, for the writing of the note was that of an educated person. Who, then, was it? What person was in the mystery whose hand he had not yet traced in connection with the affair?

Recollections of Doctor Everton haunted him, but there seemed to be no reason why that person should call for an interview at Kenney's which he could just as well have at Summit View.

Allen's nervous, yet effective, strokes soon carried the boat to the eastern bank. Then he sprang out, cast the painter over a pointed rock and continued his way.

From that spot Kenney's house was invisible, but he crossed the railroad tracks and began the

ascent of the hill. In the darkness of the trees this was no easy task, and it was not without many a stumble that he reached a point near the house.

When he did, he found confirmation of all his fears.

Late as was the hour, a light was burning inside.

It showed but feebly, for the curtains were down, and they were of a novel kind, in keeping with the poverty of the family.

As Marlowe was considerably behind the time when the interview was appointed in the note, he had felt some fears that he would be too late, but he was reassured and rapidly strode toward the door.

His feverish condition prevented him from giving any thought to his course, or to think how he was to explain himself if Estelle was not there; he felt sure she was there, and took consideration of nothing else.

Advancing to the door, he rapped imperiously.

Then came a pause. He waited for an answer, but none came. Utter silence reigned in the house. Except for the dim light, it might have been a place long deserted by human beings.

Allen sharply repeated his summons.

Again the pause; again dead silence. A night-bird winged its way over his head, uttering a shrill cry, but there was nothing more. Were the inmates of the house really asleep, or was this delay intended to cover their tracks?

For a third time Marlowe knocked, and this time it was a veritable assault on the door; one which made the stout wood shake as though beset by an earthquake.

The echo had hardly died away when the door opened and Allen stood face to face with a young woman. One glance satisfied him that she was Neil Kenney's daughter. He had heard of her before, and report said that she was as wild and untamed as the goat of mountain fastness; a true member of the family of barbarians.

She stood before him as cool and unconcerned as though everything was of common order, but her appearance was so peculiar that for a moment he forgot his errand.

She was of small stature, with a dusky face, black eyes, and abundant hair which clustered around her face in short, erratic curls which were as black as the raven's wing. Her garments put all fashion to defiance; the short skirt being as plain of style as such a garment could be, while the cut-away jacket which covered her shoulders was of gaudy red.

Well might she be termed a barbarian!

For a moment she waited, and then as Marlowe remained silent, a smile broke over her dusky face which was bright and saucy beyond description.

"Well," she cried, mockingly, "have you no tongue? One would think that a gallant gentleman who could make such a racket with his fist would be able to say a word or two with his tongue."

"Girl," exclaimed Allen, "where is Estelle Wayne?"

"Where is Queen Victoria?" she retorted. "What in the world are you talking about? If, as I suspect, she is one of the fine people over the river, you need not come here for her."

"Do you mean to say that she is not here?"

"Of course she isn't here."

"It is false! She is here, and I will see her."

The girl tossed her head defiantly.

"Upon my word!" she said, with a pause between each word, "you are an imperious fellow! Since when were you appointed lord high inspector of this house?"

"Dare you let me enter?"

"Do I dare? Really, am I to understand that you think I am afraid of you?"

The mocking defiance was colored with the glow and brightness which marked her every word and gesture, but it stung Marlowe to the quick. He fiercely grasped her arm.

"Let me pass!" he said, peremptorily. "I am not to be kept here while your infamous allies—"

He paused and dropped her arm as though he had received an electric shock. Out on the night-air had rung a human scream, so full of pain and terror that it seemed to turn his blood to ice.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DAUGHTER OF THE BARBARIANS.

UTTER silence followed the cry, and Allen Marlowe could not have stirred if he would. To him the cry seemed most terrible, and he could only stare at the girl's face in speechless surprise and dismay.

Had he come too late? Did that scream announce a tragedy even more dire than he had expected?

Kit Kenney did not seem in the least moved, and a bright smile broke over her face.

"What! are you frightened?" she banteringly cried. "Go to, my gallant gentleman; you would never do for a knight-errant!"

But her light words aroused Marlowe from his stupor, and he strode across the thresh-

old, caught Kit by the arm and swung her forcibly to one side. He was not sure whether the cry had come from a rear room or the outer air, but in any case it was from the rear of the cabin, and he intended to go through.

His way was not barred by the girl or any one else, and he tore open the inner door and passed to the rear room.

There he saw an unexpected sight.

A light was burning in the room, and by an open window sat a boy of about thirteen years; a wild, elfish-looking young fellow, who did not need to be introduced as Kit Kenney's brother. There was no sign of Estelle Wayne, nor of a tragedy, and all was so peaceful that Marlowe again came to a pause; and then the boy, who was looking at him attentively, unclosed his mouth and gave utterance to a yell which was so much like the one which had sounded before that the two could hardly have been distinguished.

The boy then laughed and exclaimed:

"Hallo! What is going on here, anyhow? To what am I indebted for the honor of this visit? Didn't know you had company, Kit."

"Boy," imperiously interrupted Marlowe, "where is Estelle Wayne?"

"Where is who?"

"Miss Wayne."

"Now you ask too much. The Waynes live at Summit View, but if you take this palace for their plebeian hut, you make a great mistake."

"Our fine gentleman will have it that Miss Wayne is here, Nick," added Kit, with a sarcastic laugh.

Marlowe turned upon her fiercely.

"Will you have done with this idle talk?" he cried. "I am not deaf or blind, and I know that Miss Wayne has been here. Will you, a woman, stand there and act against one of your own sex? Tell me, where is Estelle Wayne?"

"Am I her keeper?" mocked Kit, airily. "It must be that you forget who I am. The lords and ladies of Summit View are not on our visiting list. Nick, perhaps our merry gentleman would like you for a guide, while he seeks for the Princess Estelle."

"I want to know the meaning of that scream—the first one," said Allen, firmly.

"'Twas I who screamed, and I did it for fun," replied Nick, nonchalantly.

"I don't believe you."

"No! Well, that part don't worry me. I am a Kenney, and nobody outside my own family ever believed me yet. Here I am known as a miracle of veracity."

Marlowe saw that he was not advancing in the least degree by this idle talk, and it occurred to him that he was being intentionally detained to cover the movements of others. His first idea that the scream which had chilled him so was one of human pain had been dissipated by subsequent events, and he now believed that Kit and her brother were playing with him.

He turned sternly toward the girl.

"You say that Miss Wayne is not here. Dare you prove it by showing me over the house?"

"It's rather a late hour to show rooms, but I am always ready to oblige so fair-spoken a gentleman. Come with me, and you shall see."

They turned away, while Nick elevated his feet and began to whistle a lively air in a low key. Barbarian or not, these young people seemed uncommonly sharp-witted and intelligent, and Allen felt that they had been underestimated by others.

Kit led the way, explaining as she did so that the rest of the family were spending the night at the village below, and showed Allen over the whole house with hesitation. It was not large, and a short time served to convince him that Estelle was not there.

When the last room had been searched she turned upon him with a mocking smile.

"Are you satisfied?"

"No!"

"No! Upon my word, you are a born skeptic."

"I am satisfied that Miss Wayne is not now here, but I believe she has been here. Do you deny it?"

"Certainly, I do!"

"Then how do you explain this paper?"

He thrust into her hand the note he had found near Summit View. She read it without change of expression, and then shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't explain it. Why should I? I never saw it before, and know nothing about it. If you mean to insinuate that there was to be a meeting here to-night, the compact has not been kept. I assure you that is a fact."

Her expression was so honest as she spoke that, though his opinion did not waver, he felt that it would be time thrown away to strive further with her. She had the will and strength to act her part well.

He turned irritably away and descended to the lower part of the house, resolved to leave at once and search the grounds, but as he reached the main room, he came to a sudden stop.

Another moment and he caught up a scarf which had, until then, hung unnoticed over the back of a chair. One close look he gave it, and then held it full before Kit's eyes.

"Perhaps you will longer deny that Miss Wayne has been here!" he cried. "This scarf

is here; I could swear to it among a thousand. She has been here and this scarf was left. Now will you confess?"

Strong as was the girl's composure she had at first betrayed marked annoyance at sight of the scarf, but it soon vanished.

She tossed her head disdainfully.

"When I have anything to confess I shall not come to you, my bold knight of the imperious will. As for the scarf, I found it this afternoon by the river."

"It is false! I saw it in Miss Wayne's possession after dark this evening."

"Go and return it then, and she may give you a half-dollar for your trouble. As for me, I'm tired of you and your company. You had better go. If you have ever heard of my father you probably know how he would act in a case like this, and I hope I shall not be obliged to tell him that you misconducted yourself here."

"You cannot frighten me by the mention of Neil Kenny's name, but I certainly don't intend to waste any more time here. I see that all this has been done to delay me, so that I need not make discoveries. One word, though, girl—has harm been done Estelle Wayne here?"

Marlowe accompanied the question with a piercing glance, as though to read Kit's very thoughts, but she answered promptly, an angry flash in her eyes.

"Nobody was ever harmed here—certainly no woman. Do you suppose I would stand idle and see one of my own sex injured?"

There was an air of sincerity about her at last which greatly relieved Marlowe, and he gravely replied:

"I sincerely hope not, for one woman should not war on another. Are you sure you have nothing to tell?"

"Perfectly sure."

He drew a roll of money from his pocket.

"Perhaps you may be induced—"

"I can't be induced!" she quickly retorted. "If you would bribe any one, take the rich not the poor. We are not to be bought. Did you say you were going?"

Without a word in answer Allen turned and strode from the cottage. He did not, however, at once leave the vicinity. The scarf amply proved that Estelle had been there; she might still be near.

He made a thorough search of the ghostly nooks around the place, but he seemed to be the only person astir. The wind moved gently through the wood, whispering to the giant tree as it went, but it was the only voice of the night. The light had gone out in Kenney's cottage, and every one but Marlowe seemed at rest.

Abandoning the search at last, he returned to the river. He intended to cross at once, but when he looked for his boat it was not to be found. He had left it well secured, but boat and painter were alike gone, and the Hudson rippled on sluggishly and showed no craft upon its surface.

"Stolen!" muttered the young man, viciously. "Perhaps they can convince me now that nothing has been wrong to-night. They have stolen the boat to prevent pursuit, and I shall have to find another or swim the river."

He wandered along the bank, but had gone only a few rods when he came upon his own craft well secured to a rock. Plainly, no one wanted it, but its position had been changed to delay him.

He was in a state of feverish fear over Estelle's real or imaginary peril, but did not know how to act to best serve her interests; though as he did not know where else to look, he decided to return to Summit View.

Entering the boat he rowed across the river.

When he reached the western bank he looked in the mud for fresh signs, but, failing to find any, climbed the bluff and went at once to Wayne's grounds. The entire house was dark and silent, but this did not surprise him. If Estelle had returned, she would take every possible precaution.

"If she had returned!" Those words, and the idea they conveyed, meant a good deal to him. He did not longer incline to the belief that a tragedy had occurred at Kenney's, but he was not sure enough in his position to feel at ease.

He was looking up to her window when a low cough sounded behind him. He turned quickly and saw the form of a man only a few feet away.

"Well, young man, how goes it?" asked a dry voice.

Marlowe did not reply. The greeting was not friendly, and he was impressed by a sense of danger to come.

CHAPTER VII.

DRAWN REVOLVERS.

OLD DOUBLEDARK had not been deceived as to the character of the man with whom he talked in the grove. Two things were very evident.

First, the man was the possessor of dangerous secrets, and the success of the effort to solve the Summit View mystery was imperiled by him. He knew that the scholarly recluse, Gordon Brentwood, was, really, a detective, and if he told his secret, the plotter against the Waynes would take alarm and make good his escape.

Secondly, the man meant mischief. Old Doubledark could see that in every word and motion; and he was not blind to the fact that the stranger's hand was hovering near his pocket.

Being thus alert, the detective was ready for anything, and when his companion suddenly drew the revolver and turned it upon him, he was ready for the attack.

The distance between them was but short, and with a quick spring the detective was upon his enemy. His hand closed over the man's wrist, turning the weapon away, and then there was a struggle for its possession.

A fierce exclamation fell from the stranger's lips, and he fought fiercely, but he had to deal with a man who was the hero of dozens of personal encounters. The advantage of strength and skill rested with Old Doubledark, and he soon succeeded in wresting the revolver away.

Shoving his captive up against a tree, he held him in a grasp not to be broken.

"There you are!" he coolly observed.

"Curse you!" growled the prisoner.

"That's empty talk, and it's quite a comedown from trying to shoot me."

"My will is good enough ter do that."

"I don't doubt you, or blame you for failing to shoot me. On the whole, I am satisfied as it is."

"I ain't!"

"Possible? Why do you want to shoot me?"

"You're in the way."

"Of whom?"

"All honest men!"

"You are a facetious fellow, even if you don't know it. Well, you see you've gotten into trouble by trying, like the honest man you are, to kill me."

"It wa'n't my fault."

"Whose was it?"

"That o' the man who sent me."

"Who sent you?"

"Don't know; I met him over yonder, an' he offered me twenty dollars ter shoot ye."

"Your services were dog-cheap at that price. Is the man there, now?"

"He said he'd wait."

"I'd like to see him."

"You kin by goin' there."

"Will you lead me?"

"Yes."

"Now you begin to talk like a man!" heartily responded Old Doubledark. "Does your man know me by sight?"

"No."

"Then you may take me there, and introduce me as Jake Smith, gardener. How does that strike you?"

"Very good," answered the prisoner, with suspicious eagerness.

"All right; beave ahead."

The detective partially relaxed his hold, but did not give the man any chance to escape. This the latter did not seem inclined to do. Perhaps he had a more important idea in his mind, but Old Doubledark started off with him as cheerfully as though no such things as traps and treachery were ever met with in his professional life.

The small wood, or grove, was a continuation of the collection of trees which surrounded Summit View. On the detective's premises they were all of natural growth, but were so far apart that grass grew nearly everywhere under them. Toward the east, however, the growth was thicker, and a group of small pines made a dark corner.

Toward this Old Doubledark was conducted by his prisoner.

They entered the shadow, and the unknown's eyes rolled restlessly about as though he was seeking to discover some person or thing. Evidently he was successful, for he suddenly made a leap for liberty, at the same time crying:

"At him, boys; at him! A hundred dollars to the man who kills him!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when two other men sprung from the cover of the pines and darted toward the detective. It was evident at a glance that he had been decoyed into a trap, and that he was called upon to face danger with the odds all against him.

While they were walking to the place the decoy had been filled with exultation. Such an easy victory over a detective was unusual, and it amused him greatly to see how blindly Old Doubledark was walking to his doom.

It was well that he exulted early—he never had another chance.

His leap for freedom was checked at the start. The detective's grasp held him fast, and in another moment a blow brought him, half-stunned, to Old Doubledark's feet. The latter had used a clubbed revolver to strike, but he had another use for it.

Obedient to the command the other men were making for him, but the reception was warmer than they had bargained for. Up came the revolver, and Doubledark fired three times in rapid succession.

The first shot brought a yell of pain; the second made the assailants recoil; the third sent them away at the top of their speed. They had been conquered without a blow on their part, but the detective knew that they went away

heavier than they came by the addition of some of the lead emptied from his revolver.

Satisfied that he was rid of them, he jerked his bewildered captive to his feet.

"There, you fool! you see how you have come out! Have you another ambush for me?"

The stern, sarcastic inquiry brought only a groan from the prisoner.

"So you really supposed I was stupid enough to be fooled by you?" pursued Doubledark. "I sometimes think that one-half the world is composed of villains, and the other half of idiots. You are a mixture of both, and a dismal failure at both!"

"You've got it all yer own way."

"So I have, and I mean to keep it so. I scented your ambush from the start, but was willing to see what was in it. Who were those men?"

"I don't know."

"Still on the lie, are you?"

"It's the honest truth. They are tramps I picked up. I wanted you out o' the way, an' I meant to use them an' then drop 'em."

"And who are you?"

There was no reply.

"You may as well out with it," Old Doubledark added.

"Oh! Lord, I'm a friend o' the man you're spottin'."

"What man?"

"Him in the big house."

"Wayne's?"

"Yes."

"What man is there?"

"I don't know—wish I did. See here, boss, I'll make a clean breast on't ef you'll go light with me."

"You shall be duly rewarded. Talk away!"

"Thar is somebody in that house I know on. He was a crook in New York. I knowed he was up ter some game here, an' I come ter these parts ter get at him an' share the boddle. I found a hut on t'other side o' the river, an' settled in it, makin' a show o' fishin'."

"Are you Bent, the fisherman?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen the 'New York crook?'"

"No, I don't know who he is."

"How is that?"

"He's a sharp old rat, an' in the old days he used ter put on disguises, an' show up only at night. None o' his pals knowed who he was, but it was generally thought he was a high-toned chap. Wal, I've found out he's in Wayne's house as one o' the guests, but I'll be blowed ef I know which he is."

"What's his real name?"

"He called hisself Miles Rogerson in New York!"

"Why did you go for me?"

"I's afeerd you'd scare Rogerson off afore I could get at him, an' git a share o' his boddle."

"What boddle?"

"I don't know what he is workin' for, but it must be a good lay. He throwed up another good stake ter take this, and he ain't no fool!"

"How do you know I am a detective?"

"I've seen ye in New York."

"Humph! Who am I?"

"That I don't know, but I seen ye at Police Headquarters, Mulberry street. You was talkin' with the Super' o' Perleece."

During this conversation Old Doubledark had been carefully weighing Bent's every word, and he was satisfied that he was at last sincere.

"My man, is there no way by which you can put me on to Miles Rogerson, and enable me to learn just who he is?" the detective asked.

"I reckon that is."

"How?"

"I'm ter meet him ter-night—leastways, I've notified him ter come ter a rendezvous."

"How can you do that if you don't know who he is?" quickly asked Doubledark.

"Whatever lay he's on, he's keepin' his hand hid. Thar is some several tramps about here, as usual in warm weather, an' Rogerson is usin' 'em. He still has disguises, an' don't let them see how he looks; but he uses them. I got on ter that, an' found out that he had a job fur one. I axed that man ter leave a note last night where the cap'n would git it, an' he agreed. I suppose he's got it."

"Where is the tramp now?"

"Rogerson gi'n him five dollars an' a railroad ticket fur Albany, an' the tramp left this mornin'."

"Humph! Where and when did you ask Rogerson to meet you?"

"To-night, at twelve, at my hut."

"Do you think he'll come?"

"Yes; I told him I'd blow on him ef he didn't."

"Right; and now the compact is made he ought not to be disappointed. I will be there to meet Rogerson!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SNARE FOR ROGERSON.

BENT started a little.

"Say, you'll kick up a muss!" he exclaimed.

"How so?"

"I won't make a cent out o' Rogerson, an' ef he is once scared, you won't see him no more 'round here."

"Rest easy, my good sir. Having got the best of you, I shall not allow you to share in his evil gains; whereas, if you stick by me, I shall do what is right. As for scaring him off, we will use strategy. Can I hide in your hut and overhear what is said, and see Rogerson, without his knowing I am there?"

"Yes."

"Then let's cross the river at once, and make ready for his reception."

Old Doubledark had won a complete victory over his companion. He had done it first by worsting him in their personal encounter, and their conversation had convinced him that the wisest thing he could do was to be faithful to the detective and save his own neck. He was not a member of Miles Rogerson's gang, and his only purpose in the case was to serve his own interests.

As he was a prisoner, it looked as though his only hope lay in gaining the detective's goodwill, and thus getting out of his own trouble.

Detectives find no better aids than criminals themselves, for they will work against each other, despite the old assertion that, "There is honor among thieves!"

Doubledark and Bent walked to the river. There the pretended fisherman had a boat, and they crossed to the western bank. From there it was not far to the hut Bent had mentioned, and, once there, they prepared for the visitor.

The detective was by no means certain that Rogerson would put in an appearance; it would all depend on how much he feared Bent. The latter's letter would doubtless be a surprise. If Rogerson believed himself in serious danger, he would probably visit Bent and try to purchase his silence; whereas, if he felt secure where he was, he would ignore the summons.

The arrangements for his reception consisted of lighting the hut, and then Doubledark concealed himself behind a piece of furniture where he could remain at his ease. It was possible that Rogerson would reconnoiter before making his appearance boldly, but the detective took to the ambush early, and bade Bent refrain from speaking to him, or looking toward his refuge.

The wait began, and continued for nearly two hours.

As eleven o'clock approached Doubledark grew more alert. Bent was ostentatiously repairing a fishing-rod, but making as little noise as possible. They wished to hear the first sound outside.

Doubledark looked at his watch. Fourteen minutes to eleven. Would the invited guest come?

Bent smoked steadily, and gave close attention to his work. The scene was peaceful, but it was destined to be rudely interrupted.

The detective had seen nothing, heard nothing, and gained no knowledge of any change in the situation, but the report of a revolver in the hut brought him suddenly to his feet. As he rose, he gained a view of the area before him, and was in time to see Bent clasp his head in his hands and fall heavily to the floor.

But the detective saw more. Dimly outlined in the darkness outside the hut was the form of a man, and one of his hands held the revolver which had done the mischief.

The truth flashed upon Old Doubledark at once. Rogerson had come as commanded, but, instead of appearing to Bent for conference, had shot that man down in cold blood.

In the imperfect light it was impossible to see how the assassin looked, or who he was, but the detective did not stop to rely upon his eyes. With steps quick enough to do credit to a much younger man, he dashed across the floor and out of the hut. No doubt Miles Rogerson had another bullet ready, but Doubledark and danger were old acquaintances.

He was fearless in the discharge of his duty.

When he reached the open air the assassin was no longer visible at the window, and it was mere chance that the pursuer caught sight of him vanishing among the trees.

It was at once evident that the chances of running him down in the underbrush were few, but away went Doubledark in rapid pursuit.

The bushes at once concealed the fugitive, and when the detective reached the spot where he had last seen him, he was no longer there. The chase was not given up, however. Doubledark kept on rapidly until satisfied that the man had not gone in a direct line. When he halted and turned back, it was with the knowledge that if Rogerson was at all sharp he was safe from pursuit.

Despite this the searcher did not yield tamely. He beat up the bushes from the crest of the hill to the river, and only abandoned the work when convinced that it was wholly useless.

Reluctantly he retraced his steps to the hut.

The revolver-shot had upset his plans, and it showed how desperate a man Rogerson was, but from that time the detective was inexorably determined to run him down.

Reaching the hut he found Bent prostrate on the floor, and to all appearance dead, but another thing at once arrested Doubledark's attention. Scrawled upon the floor were several

broad, distinct characters made with a coal from the wood-fire, and these, as was readily seen, formed letters and words:

"I KNOW YOU! KEEP OFF, OR SHARE HIS FATE!"

The inscription was as easily understood as read; while he had vainly hunted for Rogerson, the latter had boldly returned and "left his mark" most emphatically.

Doubledark gazed in momentary dismay at the secret foe's message. He was not frightened by the menace, but it was a blow to his pride.

He unjustly accused himself, mentally, of having been outwitted, but his coolness soon returned and he made a disdainful gesture.

"All right, Miles Rogerson!—you have won this round, but I'll be shot if I don't beat you out yet!"

Once more he read the first words.

"I know you!" the assassin had written.

Doubledark turned quickly to the window and pulled down the curtain.

"Perhaps you know me, and perhaps you don't. I believe you are some distance away, now, but if you are near, you're not going to spy upon me."

He turned to what he thought was Bent's lifeless body, but a little investigation showed him that the man still lived. The bullet had plowed a furrow along his head, stunning him, but the wound, though severe, was not necessarily fatal.

No doubt Rogerson had come back to see if his work was well done, and had decided that Bent was dead, but Doubledark had some knowledge of surgery, and knew that he was better than several dead men.

He set to work to resuscitate his ally.

This was not easily accomplished, but he was successful in the end. Bent regained his senses, but was in a weak and demoralized condition, and the detective saw that he would require the care of a good physician to effect a complete cure.

As he had been of use to Doubledark, the latter generously decided to overlook the double attempt upon his own life, earlier in the night, and do what he could for him. A few miles below, at the village, the detective had friends whom he was not afraid to trust, and he decided to take the wounded man there in a boat and leave him.

When this was done, Bent would disappear from sight for awhile, and be where the enemy could not harm or bribe him.

Bent agreed to all this, but Doubledark was reluctant to go at once. He was wasting time over Bent which he was anxious to use elsewhere. He asked the man if he was afraid to remain alone for an hour, and, receiving a negative reply, did not hesitate to use the chance offered.

He left the house, went to the river, entered the boat and rowed quickly back to the western side. When he arrived he lost no time in going to Edward Wayne's grounds. Despite the delay, he hoped to see some sign which would aid him.

He was not long in making a discovery, important or otherwise.

Moving through the grounds he came upon a man who was standing under a tree and surveying the house critically. There was nothing but darkness to be seen there, but that, or something else, appeared to interest him.

"Allen Marlowe!"

Old Doubledark's lips framed, but did not utter, the words, and his suspicions increased. Why was Allen wandering about at that hour, if he was an honest man?

Had he just come from Bent's hut?

The sound of his movements attracted Allen's attention, and the young man turned quickly. Concealment was no longer possible, and the detective spoke.

"Well, young man, how goes it?" he asked.

Marlowe regarded him suspiciously.

"Who the dickens are you?" he rudely asked.

"A man who, like you, is up late."

"I suppose I have a right to be."

"Beyond doubt, if your purpose is honest."

"Is that you, Brentwood?"

"It is I, Marlowe."

"What are you doing here?"

"Taking the air."

Allen scowled. He had never exactly liked Mr. Gordon Brentwood; he was now angry at being discovered; and he pointedly replied:

"Not on your own grounds, I believe."

"Like you, I am not. We stand even on that score. You are a guest here; I have all possible privileges from Edward Wayne. Have you been far?"

"Have I been far?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"My wanderings have not been confined to Wayne's grounds; I thought it might be the same with you."

The memory of the late events at Neil Kenny's house was strong in Allen's mind, and the uncertainty concerning Estelle rendered him irritable. He did not relish Brentwood's questions, and he curtly returned:

"Not being on the witness-stand, I have nothing to confess, sir."

"Ugh! don't speak of courts of law. Were you ever there, Mr. Marlowe?"

"Where?"

"In a court, as witness or otherwise?"

"I cannot claim familiarity with such places. I don't envy you your knowledge, especially if your recollections are unpleasant."

Marlowe was pointed and curt, but Old Doubledark answered very calmly:

"I have seen criminals on trial before now."

"Not friends of yours, I hope."

Allen accompanied the retort with a half-apologetic laugh, for he remembered that Brentwood was on friendly terms with Edward Wayne, but the venom remained.

"Oh! no, Mr. Marlowe," was the good-humored answer. "I choose my friends wisely, and I should as soon expect to see *you* in the prisoner's box!"

"I'll let you know when I get there. For the present, good-night!"

Speaking shortly and ungraciously, Allen wheeled and walked away toward the house. Doubledark looked after him thoughtfully.

"Is he Miles Rogerson, and has he just come from Bent's? If so, the boast written on the floor was empty talk. I'll swear that Marlowe does not suspect me to be a detective. It is an odd coincidence that he is out so late just after the shooting, but if he was guilty he would be more likely to get indoors as soon as possible. On the whole, tart and vicious as the young man is, I'm inclined to think well of him. I'll investigate him a bit further, and then turn to Everton. Now, I'll go and row Bent to the village."

CHAPTER IX.

BEATING AGAINST THE ROCK.

ALLEN MARLOWE went at once to his room after leaving Gordon Brentwood, but it was some time before he slept. The uncertainty surrounding Estelle made him nervous and feverish. He had no means of knowing whether she had reached home in safety, but a strong belief that she had, turned his thoughts in another direction.

Why had she gone to Neil Kenney's house? What malign influence had led her, who should have moved like a queen among the best of men and women, to visit the mean home of the barbarian Kenneys?

Clearly some great peril menaced her, but what it was he could not surmise. He fell asleep while trying.

One load was removed from his mind when he saw Estelle in the morning. She was as calm and gracious as ever. Nothing in her manner showed that she had ever known the most trivial trouble, and when she greeted him her gaze did not waver, or linger to study his face.

Such composure was remarkable, and Allen was almost staggered. Could it be that he was mistaken, after all?

An event after breakfast helped him to decisively settle this question.

As Estelle moved away she was accosted by one of the female servants.

"Excuse me, Miss Wayne," said the latter, "but were you ill last night?"

"Ill? No. Why do you ask?"

"Because I saw you come in after midnight, with your outer garments on, and I thought you had been out for fresh air."

"Nonsense, Martha!" lightly returned Miss Wayne. "You must have dreamed it. I was in my room before ten, and left there at eight this morning."

With this rather vague answer, she passed on, but Allen had received confirmation enough to take his next step in the matter. At the risk of seriously offending Estelle, he intended to bring up the occurrences of the previous night.

He watched his chance and, before the forenoon was gone, saw her separate herself from the others and go to sit in a retired place as though she longed to be free from them all. It was not to be, however, for Allen would not neglect the opportunity.

As he advanced toward her, his steps insensibly grew slower. She was like a queen in retirement. Sitting at the end of a rustic bench, one shapely white hand supported her head, while the other lay idly upon a book she held, but did not read. Her gaze was fixed on the ground, and the long eyelashes swept her fair cheeks with a caress which Marlowe envied.

Above her nodded the green branches of the trees, and the air was fragrant with the odor of flowers, while a bird hovered on the branch of a tree almost beside her and looked with calm confidence that he was near a friend.

A feeling of bitterness was in Marlowe's heart. Once he might have approached as a lover; now he could not advance as a friend, even, for such a change is as impossible as that fire-consumed fuel should resume its olden form.

The young man's steps made little sound, and he was almost beside her before she gave any consciousness of his proximity. Then she suddenly raised her head.

He advanced and somewhat stiffly held out the scarf he had found at Kenney's.

"Pardon me, Miss Wayne, but I think you have lost something you may value."

Very quiet was his voice, but his eyes studied her face keenly. Was it fancy, or did a startled light show for a moment in her eyes? Only a moment, for the old, calm smile came to her face.

She extended her hand for the scarf.

"Thank you, Mr. Marlowe. I loaned it to Emma, my maid, and she must have left it in the grounds."

"Do not blame Emma," was the somewhat curt reply. "If you will think carefully, you may remember leaving it at Neil Kenney's."

Her eyes were raised to his in calm surprise.

"At Neil Kenney's! What do you mean?"

"I do not think I need to explain."

"That is as you will. It is immaterial to me."

"I see you wish to avoid speaking of it."

His voice and manner were far from courteous, and she uttered his name in grave rebuke:

"Mr. Marlowe!"

"Oh! why continue this farce?" he cried, impetuously. "I know as well as you that you were at Kenney's last night, and your efforts to deny it are useless. You owe me an explanation; I feel that I have a right to ask it."

Marlowe's choice of words was unfortunate, and he recognized the fact as soon as he spoke, but the mischief was done. Estelle looked at him with calm surprise which was not unmixed with severity.

"You forget yourself, Mr. Marlowe. If you are in condition to be responsible for what you say, no reproof of mine can be too strong. You have not a right to ask an explanation of me. In what way am I responsible to you for what I do?"

Allen put out one hand deprecatingly.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Wayne—most humbly, I beg your pardon. I did not mean what I said. If I offended, it was because my heart was full—of sorrow. How can you expect me to be calm when every day here is so many hours of torture?"

"Were Summit View so unpleasant to me, I should not remain," was the pointed reply.

"There was a time when it was Paradise to me."

"Whatever you may refer to, let us remember that the past is a thing dead and buried, and not mention it. Shall we join Eddila and Clara?"

"Not yet, Miss Wayne. I see that I am offending you, but I must say more. I was at Neil Kenney's last night, as you are, perhaps, well aware. Why did you not remain and accept my protection? I would risk my life for you, right or wrong!"

Estelle lifted her brows in real or assumed surprise.

"You talk in riddles, again."

If the lady was not sincere, her mask was a perfect one. She showed no signs of dismay; only wonder and grave rebuke.

"I see you still wish to deny all, but I will show you that denial is useless," he quickly answered. "That ill-looking fellow who visited you here yesterday brought you a note, signed 'Sirocco,' which commanded you to meet the writer at Kenney's last night. Here is the note!"

He dropped it in her hand and rapidly continued.

"You went, crossing the river in a boat from the other side. I followed in one of Mr. Wayne's boats. I went to Kenney's, but failed to see you. While that Gypsy-looking girl delayed me, you made good your escape."

"A very pretty romance!"

"It is neither. It is truth, but not agreeable. Oh! Estelle, what evil shadow has fallen on your life which leads you to such steps? You went to Neil Kenney's, a place all honest people shun, and went at the dead of night, with what object I do not know, but—"

Marlowe stopped.

Estelle had risen, and was facing him in a way which deprived him of all power of speech. No one could say now that she was unmoved, though a certain composure still remained. Her face was white, and in her dusky eyes, which seemed to have grown still darker, was a light which, though he might not analyze it, startled him into silence.

"Mr. Marlowe," she said, in a hard, tense voice, "you have said quite enough. There was a time when I thought you a gentleman, but only a coward would insult a woman."

"Estelle!" he cried, "in heaven's name, do not accuse me of that. If I thought you believed me capable of insulting you, I would bless the hand which would strike me dead at your feet!"

"You said that I went to a place which all honest people shun."

"Did I say you went willingly? No! by my life, no! and I meant no harm. Estelle, Estelle! will you not listen to me? I know that you are in trouble; that a dark shadow has fallen over your life; that some enemy is making you miserable; and that it was he who compelled you to go to Kenney's last night."

"How do you know this?"

Her cool, practical question set him all adrift, and his reply was not ready.

"Did you see me at Kenney's?" she continued.

"No, but—"

"Can you prove that this note was addressed to me?"

"No; but, Estelle—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Marlowe, but you are assuming much more than you know, or have a right to assume. A right! What right have you to assume anything in regard to me? A few days ago I expressed a desire to be friends with you. Already you are making me repent, and if you again refer—"

"But, Estelle, it is my love for you!" cried Marlowe, hoarsely. "Do you think me base enough to persecute any woman—to interfere where I am not wanted? No! by my life, no! I am no persecutor of women. But, Estelle, though somber, overwhelming shadow has fallen on our lives, my love for you is still like a mighty torrent which must overleap all obstacles and rush to its haven!"

"Have I not said this love must cease?"

Estelle's voice trembled; her words were but little more than a whisper.

"Who can command love to cease and be obeyed? One might as well try to divert the coming and going of the sun."

"One thing, at least, you can do. Give up all thought of me! Let happen what will to me; resolve not to care in the least, and keep the resolve. I request this, and—I must command it! Meditation will show you how unpleasant you are making my life, and if it is continued, my father and I must leave Summit View."

For the first time Allen Marlowe gave way to despair. Her words seemed to cut away the last hope, and though the pain in his heart had never been sharper, he bowed submissively.

"It shall be as you wish. I certainly must protest against your leaving Summit View; if any one goes, it must be I. You shall be bothered no more by me, Miss Wayne, and I humbly ask you to forgive me if you can."

He turned abruptly at the last word and strode hastily away.

Some answer was made him, but he did not hear it, and the winding path soon hid him from view.

Hugh Warburton had been idly talking with Clara Raynor, though he frequently glanced toward the other couple, and when he saw Allen's rapid retreat he excused himself and went to join him. He found Marlowe walking moodily through that portion of the grounds known as the Ghost's Walk.

It included the carriage road to the mansion, which was lined on each side by giant maples, the branches of which met overhead and formed an arch of bright green.

To this place the sun never penetrated when leaves were on the trees, save in yellow bars of eccentric shapes, which seemed to have stolen in secretly; and there the wind drifted lazily through, fanning the languid leaves, and whispering to the maples that stood like soldiers in line.

Here it was that Allen and Estelle had plighted their vows, but only dust and ashes were left of the old, happy days, and Marlowe was brooding over their memory when Warburton approached.

"I see you have just come from Miss Wayne," said Hugh, abruptly. "Is there any good news?"

"Yes," was the curt reply.

"Ah! let me congratulate—"

"No, do not! I say there is good news. Perhaps I should explain that the suspense is over. I have given Estelle up forever!"

"Given her up! Nonsense, my dear fellow! Are you out of your mind?"

"I almost wish I was."

"Come, come! This is not the way to regard the case. Don't let your courage waver. My word for it, all will yet turn out for the best, I think."

CHAPTER X.

FOOD FOR SUSPICION.

MARLOWE shook his head gloomily.

"Your hesitation betrays you, Hugh," he answered.

"Not so fast," returned Warburton. "Let me ask you one question: Have you any prejudice against divorced women?"

Allen turned sharply upon his companion.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I asked a simple question."

"You shall have a like answer. Such prejudices are foolish; I have none."

"Do you remember telling me of the old rumor that Miss Wayne, when a mere girl, was married to Doctor Everton?"

"Yes."

Sharply came the monosyllable from Allen's lips, and his eyes had an unpleasant appearance.

"There is reason to believe that the report, which Edward Wayne said was idle, had some foundation."

Marlowe drew a deep, quick breath.

"Explain at once what you mean!"

"I will. You see, after you told me what Mr. Wayne had casually mentioned, it occurred

to me that I had a friend who might be able to explain something, having, at the time of the alleged ceremony, been in the town where it occurred, if at all. Consequently, I telegraphed him in cipher, and have received a reply by messenger. Read, and judge for yourself."

He extended a letter as he spoke, and then walked aside and leaned against one of the maples as Marlowe read.

The letter was as follows:

"MY DEAR WARBURTON:—

"Your cipher dispatch was duly received, and I will tell you what I know about the affair to which you allude—the reported marriage of George Everton and Miss Estelle Wayne.

"I was in Moorfield at the time, and knew both by sight well, being also on speaking terms with Everton. Miss Wayne moved in a charmed circle to which I did not reach. The old judge was then at the height of his power, and one-half the State bowed low at his feet. But it is not of him that you ask information.

"Miss Wayne was then only fifteen years of age, and far from being the Miss Wayne of to-day, though her precocity made her seem not less than seventeen. The calm statue of to-day was then a bit of the madcap order, and, it was said, was decidedly willful at times.

"When it was rumored that she and Everton were married, few believed it, and a denial from Judge Wayne apparently settled the matter forever. Everton was below her in the social scale; he was not a guest at Wayne Hall, and though she had flirted with him, as school-girls will, there was no more to it.

"So said people in general. I will tell you what I saw and heard.

"The old minister of the town at that time had a nephew, named Guerdon Frazer, staying with him—a young fellow just fledged as a preacher, but without an appointment. He never received one; he was altogether too wild to minister to men's souls, and after a short time he fell into disgrace and went West.

"When I heard the rumor about Miss Wayne and George Everton, I remembered that I had seen them go secretly to the parsonage one evening, and when the denial came, I gained a suspicion. I went straight to the younger minister and charged him with having married them.

"He was frightened—there is no question about that—but he vehemently denied it; nor could I force an admission from him. He denied all, first, last and always, but implored me not to mention my suspicion, as it would only injure Miss Wayne, but, as she was so young, would throw him into disgrace and prevent his getting a chance in the pulpit if it was thought he married her.

"That is all I know about the affair, but I don't see why an innocent man should be frightened in such a case. My theory is that he *did* marry them, but, owing to the fact that Estelle was only a child, was afraid to admit it. Again, what else than this errand could have taken the couple to the parsonage secretly, as I saw them go with my own eyes?

"I believe that Estelle is to-day Mrs. George Everton, but it is her private affair, and I beg that you will never mention my belief.

"Sincerely yours, CHAS. ERWIN LAKE."

Marlowe crushed the letter into a shapeless mass as he reached the end, and Warburton turned around.

He waited in vain for Allen to speak, and finally broke the silence himself.

"What do you think of it?"

"Did I understand you to say that you knew this Charles Erwin Lake?"

"Intimately."

"Is he a reliable person?"

"Yes."

"Then it is probable that there is something to it, though I don't see why, in such a case, Estelle should go to Neil Kenney's. Everton has all desirable chance to talk with her here, and they would avoid making associates of outsiders."

"There is something to that."

"Again, if she was married to Everton, she could easily cast off the yoke. Desertion and failure to support would be an irrefragable claim."

"Possibly she wishes to avoid all scandal while the old judge lives."

"Ha! there is something in that; the thought changes the whole aspect of the case. Judge Wayne is too old, feeble and proud to be harrowed by such a revelation; it would send him swiftly to his grave; and so she intends to drag on her wretched existence until she is so situated as to fight her husband who is no husband. The infamous coward! he ought to be—"

Allen was speaking vehemently, but at this moment Hugh touched his arm.

"Hush! the very two of whom we speak—Estelle and Doctor Everton—are coming. Let us step behind a tree and avoid discovery. Possibly they seek the Ghost's Walk for a private interview, and we may overhear something of interest."

He had drawn Marlowe behind a tree, but the latter rebelled at once.

"I have no desire to act the spy," he remonstrated.

"Not for Estelle's sake?"

The argument was overwhelming. For her sake Marlowe would have dared all dangers of earth and defied the weird fiends of legendary romance. Yes, for her sake he would consent to play the eavesdropper, and try to read a solution of the mystery.

Estelle and Everton came on and entered the Ghost's Walk, but paused before reaching

the point where Allen and Hugh were concealed.

Then they began talking earnestly.

There was no way to approach them without being discovered, or, at least, running considerable risk; and to creep up and listen was a point too far for Allen to go, anyway.

So they watched from where they were.

Everton did nearly all the talking, and strong emotion seemed to have for once broken through his usual stolidity. He talked rapidly with many gestures, and as Estelle's face was turned toward them, they saw that it actually bore a frightened expression.

Several times she tried to interrupt, but he gave her no chance, and his manner became aggressive and threatening.

Warburton saw that Allen was trembling with indignation, and a fierce exclamation finally burst from the young man's lips:

"The scoundrel!" he hissed. "How dare he threaten her! If this is not quickly stopped, I will go out and chastise him as I would an ugly cur!"

"Be calm, Allen!" advised Warburton. "It is not likely she is in any danger, and you will ruin all and show your hand by precipitation."

"She shall not be misused before my eyes."

"I tell you, be calm! If you assault Everton, you will surely be banished from Summit View, and then you can no longer work for her."

There was reason in this, and Allen strove to govern himself, but it was hard.

He no longer doubted the report concerning the marriage of the two, and Estelle's late troubles seemed clearly explained. Everton was still a poor man, and it would be a great rise in the world if he could win the rich wife he had wedded but never secured.

Probably he, too, realized that to wait until Judge Wayne was dead would be to lose all, for Estelle could then defy him; and he was trying to compel her to acknowledge his claim.

So thought Marlowe, and his temporary calmness soon vanished.

Suddenly Estelle turned as though she would have fled, but Everton made a step forward and grasped her roughly by the wrist. Then Allen could bear it no longer; he started from the cover of the tree, hissing through his set teeth:

"I'll bear no more! I'll chastise him, let the result be what it may!"

CHAPTER XI.

OLD DOUBLEDARK'S DISCOVERY.

ALLEN was thoroughly in earnest, but once more Warburton checked him.

"Wait!" he directed. "You will ruin all!"

"Am I to stand here and see his contaminating hand laid upon her?" fiercely demanded Marlowe.

"Look again! The scene changes, and Doctor Everton does not impress me as having the advantage to any perceptible degree."

This was true, and what he saw cooled Allen's feverish blood considerably.

Miss Wayne had freed her wrist from the doctor's grasp, and now confronted him with the air of a tragedienne. Her fine form was drawn to its full height, her gaze was stern and rebuking, and one hand, extended in full, pointed away from them as though she was pantomimically ordering Everton from her presence in anger.

Whatever the facts of the case, the effect upon Everton was at once apparent. His own hand fell, all the aggressiveness died out of his mien, and when he spoke again it was with a humble air.

Some apology he seemed to make, and then, after a few more words, he turned and walked rapidly away toward the river. Estelle lost but little time in going in the opposite direction, toward Summit View, and Allen and Hugh were again the only tenants of the Ghost's Walk.

"Well," said the latter, "what do you think now?"

"You are undoubtedly right."

"You mean that Estelle is probably Doctor Everton's wife, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Well, how does that place you?"

"It places me where I cannot hope to win her, but not where I cannot aid her. Everton is anxious to have the marriage acknowledged before Judge Wayne dies; Estelle opposes him; and he is making her life a burden. This time she won a point from him—how, I do not know—but he has all the advantage. He has only to announce their marriage and the blow would kill proud, infirm old Judge Wayne. Everton knows that, and he will make the most of it."

"Would it be well to notify Mr. Edward Wayne?" thoughtfully asked Hugh.

"No. He is old, like his brother, though his mind is still active; and it needs strong arms to deal with men like Everton. My own arms will do in this case!"

Warburton had never before seen such an expression on his friend's face.

Marlowe was very much in earnest, and his brows were contracted in a frown which boded

no good to the disturber of Estelle Wayne's peace.

The young men walked slowly back to the house, but in utter silence. Marlowe was scarcely conscious what they were doing. He was trying to decide how he could best foil the plots against Estelle's happiness.

She had commanded him not to mention the subject to her again, and he knew that he could not win her confidence or any explanation if he did.

Without this confidence he was like one groping in the dark, and all his efforts to save her must be conceived and executed at a disadvantage.

When they reached the house Estelle was playing the piano, and the Misses Raynor, who had just been lamenting the absence of all the gentlemen, eagerly seized upon Allen and Hugh and insisted that, as Estelle was "playing divinely," they must listen.

The next few minutes developed the fact that by "listening" they meant to listen to them, not to the pianist, but they found Allen a dull companion.

He was dimly conscious that Clara was chattering all the time in his ears, and that he was making some sort of reply, but all this, like the music of the piano, seemed vague, dim and far away.

He was watching Estelle, as he had often watched her before—in wondering admiration. Was ever other woman so gifted, so beautiful, so charming?

Her form was perfect; her face a miracle of loveliness. As she played, the slight motions of her head were regally graceful; she was what a queen should be, but, surely, never was. No one else played the piano like her. Her touch was deft, skillful, expert. Rare music greeted the ear when she played, yet there was never a useless movement of the white, shapely hands. Compared to her, how absurd were ordinary players who flourished their hands with vulgar ostentation, as though to imitate the contortions of a jumping-jack!

Meditations in this and other veins so occupied Allen's attention, that he made several inappropriate replies to Clara Raynor, and he was in danger of reproof, when Edward Wayne and his wife entered the room accompanied by a new guest.

Allen saw with some vexation that it was their neighbor of the cottage, Gordon Brentwood, but that gentleman was in an exceedingly mild mood. Wayne announced that Mr. Brentwood had consented to leave his books for awhile and join them, and he was greeted in a friendly way by all except Marlowe.

The latter had taken a marked dislike to him, and he wasted no polite speeches.

Old Doubledark was equally undemonstrative. He sat down near the host and began to discuss politics and other heavy subjects, and a casual observer would have thought that he took no interest in what the young folks said and did.

In thinking thus, a mistake would have been made. The detective had come with a fixed purpose, and he was constantly attentive to it.

He did not doubt that the secret enemy was in Wayne's house, in some capacity, and, believing that the same person had wounded Bent, he was there to see if he would betray himself in any way. He had written on the floor of the hut, "I know you!" That this had been leveled at the man he had unexpectedly found with Bent, was plain, but Doubledark was not sure whether it was the truth or an empty boast.

Gradually, all the family assembled. Doctor Everton, after being absent for some hours, was the last to arrive. When he came, he was closely observed by two persons.

Marlowe watched openly, and was surprised to see the doctor and Estelle talk as though nothing had happened. What did it mean? They showed no coldness and no embarrassment; and Estelle, in particular, seemed to have forgotten all about the scene in the Ghost's Walk. Allen was perplexed, but his anger burned hotly against Everton, and he was anxious to make that man suffer.

Old Doubledark watched, too, but his notice of Everton was like that bestowed upon the other members of the household, secret and unostentatious.

He shared Allen's perplexity, however. Accustomed as he was to reading men, he could see no signs of guilt in any way of the faces about him. They might have been the most honest men living for all that their faces told.

The detective's position was peculiar. He sought to trap a criminal, but did not know who the criminal was; he sought to prevent a crime, but did not know what the crime was. When he first came to Summit View, he had been well aware that many of his professional brethren would have pronounced his work Quixotic, but if he had ever held a doubt, events had removed it.

The man who had shot Bent had been desperately in earnest, and had he not had some important scheme in mind, he would never have resorted to such extreme measures to remove one who had threatened to expose him.

The enemy was real; the plot was real; and

it remained for Doubledark to penetrate it. This he could not do in an ordinary way. He must be watchful, patient and satisfied with slow progress.

After awhile he grew tired of inactivity. He was gaining no points, and the occasion was dull to him. He seized an opportunity to ask Edward Wayne for a private interview, and they went out together. When Doubledark suggested that they go to a retired place, the host conducted him to the billiard-room.

"We shall not be interrupted here," he observed.

"I want to ask," the detective explained, "if there is anything new?"

"In regard to your scarecrow? I beg your pardon for using the term; it slipped out unconsciously."

"Then you are still skeptical?"

"I cannot believe that one of my guests is such a rascal as you intimated, and, on the whole, your story seems visionary. Understand me, my dear sir, I do not doubt your good faith, but you may be in error."

"Why are you doubtful?"

"The idea of a secret enemy, with a secret plot, is too much like a fairy tale. If such an enemy is in my house, it must be Everton, Marlowe or Warburton. The latter has only just arrived, and may be left out of the matter entirely. I am not ready to believe either Marlowe or Everton a villain, although, as I have said before, I do not wholly like the doctor. But I can't think either a criminal!"

The faintest possible smile moved Doubledark's lips, but it was full of cynicism. His long career as a detective had left him but little faith in mankind, and he had seen too many trusted men fail to let any one's position stand as a sure recommendation.

"It is not necessary to condemn any of your young men until he is proved guilty," he replied.

"Again," added Wayne, "if it is desired to rob my house, and the criminal is within its walls, why don't he go ahead?"

"I do not think ordinary robbery is intended."

"What, then?"

"I don't know; that is what we must learn. The plot is deeper; the desired gain must be greater than common burglary."

Wayne shook his head slowly. He had gained the idea that the detective was a mere theorist, and the secret enemy with his secret plot did not sound practical to the host.

While they were talking Doubledark had been standing by a heavy, leather-covered chair which was for the use of billiard-players. The chair was near the wall, and Doubledark had raised one foot to the lower round and mechanically thrown his right arm loosely over the back. At this period of the conversation his hand encountered some bulging object, and idle curiosity led him to look to the cause.

He could see as well as feel the protuberance, behind the leather-cover, and next to the wooden frame he also saw a short rent, where the cover had been torn from its fastenings. Still impelled by curiosity, the detective inserted his fingers into the aperture. They closed upon some object which at once changed his curiosity to interest—he pulled back and drew out the object.

He held a revolver!

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, "you keep your weapons in a strange place, don't you?"

"It is not mine; I never saw it before?" Wayne replied with an air of surprise.

"Who does keep a revolver here?"

"I never saw one in my house before, or in the possession of my guests."

"Then you know nothing about this?"

"Absolutely nothing. Somebody took a great liberty to mutilate my chair and place a revolver there."

"The chair looks nearly new."

"I bought it, entirely new, at the beginning of this season."

Doubledark took the revolver to the window. It was not loaded, but, plainly, had recently been discharged. There was smoke upon the barrel and in one chamber of the cylinder. The detective noticed more. In several obscure places there were discolorations, and he at once set them down as human blood. He remembered how Bent had been shot in the hut, and that the would-be murderer had visited his victim as he lay bleeding upon the floor.

A startling suspicion was suggested. Was the revolver that with which Bent had been shot?

CHAPTER XII. THE RESULT OF THE VIGIL.

DOUBLEDARK was not long in arriving at a conclusion. If the revolver had been used to shoot Bent, the man who had used it was a member of Wayne's household. He could imagine the flight of the assassin; his fear of detection; his knowledge that the revolver might betray him, and his consequent fear of keeping it on his person or in his own room; and his visit to the billiard room to hide it until he could better dispose of it.

Probably he had not thought to throw it in the river, when he crossed after the shooting,

and a wise man would not throw it away on land.

Calmly the detective turned to his companion.

"We must learn who owns this revolver."

"I will ask my guests."

"Indeed, you will not! I would not have it done for half your fortune. Mr. Wayne, find the owner of this weapon and you will have found the secret plotter of Summit View!"

"Great heavens! do you mean it?" cried Wayne, in unbounded surprise.

"I do."

"But how—what—"

"Our secret plotter, unknown to us though he is, has been active. His scheme has been placed in jeopardy, and to preserve it inviolate he has resorted to crime. This revolver, I dare swear, was the weapon used, and he concealed it here in more or less trepidation. We must learn who owns it."

"How can we do that?"

"By watching. Rest assured, he will not let it stay here long. This hiding-place was only a temporary shift, and, to-night, he will seek to dispose of it more safely."

"And you think it is owned by some one now in my house?" asked Wayne, in bewilderment.

"I know it; but let us not wander from the point at issue. When our man comes to remove the revolver he must be detected."

"But we don't know when he will come."

"We must watch," calmly responded Doubledark. "I say 'we,' but I will take the bulk of the work upon my own shoulders. The criminal will seek to remove this tell-tale weapon before day again dawns. He is not likely to touch it before midnight, but this room must not be left unguarded a moment. Do your young men often play billiards?"

"Sometimes, in the morning; but in the evening they devote themselves to the other guests."

"Good! Now, I have business which will keep me at my house from eight o'clock until nine, or a little later, this evening. All the rest of the time I will watch here. Can you manage to fill my place, and keep watch from eight to nine?"

"Easily. I can excuse myself, and I will sit here while you are absent."

"Capital! What time do you have supper?"

"At a quarter after six."

"It is now a quarter to six. Go back to your guests, Mr. Wayne, and let them suppose I have returned home, but relieve me at the appointed hour."

"I will do so."

The master of Summit View went out, and Doubledark sat down in a retired corner, where he would not be seen readily, and made a pretense of reading a paper industriously. He felt that the responsibility upon him was but nominal, for the unknown was not likely to come for his property until late at night.

The discovery of the revolver promised to radically change the whole situation. Thus far Doubledark had been helpless because he did not know whom to suspect, but with suspicion pointing to any one person, he felt confident of his ability to soon bring the plotter to justice.

The first stage of affairs soon passed, and at half-past seven Wayne came to relieve him. Although not expecting any developments during the evening, the detective gave his substitute directions to be cautious and watchful. The revolver had, of course, been replaced in its hiding-place, and Wayne must see that it was not removed unnoticed by him.

Doubledark left the house secretly and started for his cottage. Near the boundary line he paused and looked back.

"I wish I could remain there, myself," he thought, "but orders must be obeyed. I hate to be away a moment, but there are not likely to be any developments."

The detective had that day received a letter from the Chief of Police of New York city, requesting information as to a case Doubledark had once been engaged upon. The criminal in that case was again under arrest, with meager evidence against him, and the entire inside facts of the other case were desired.

Doubledark could not well neglect the matter longer, although he was now sorry he had not utilized the time during the day; and when he reached home he only paused to swallow a hasty supper and then sat down to write.

For three-quarters of an hour his pen moved rapidly over the paper, and then, with a sigh of relief, he wrote the last words and made the letter ready for mail. While doing this he heard the door-bell ring, but he gave little attention to the matter until the door of his own room was unceremoniously opened and Edward Wayne appeared.

One look at his flushed, excited face was enough to tell of misfortune.

"Well, what's up?" Doubledark asked.

"The revolver is gone!" Wayne exclaimed.

"Who took it?"

"I don't know!"

An expression of disgust appeared on the detective's face.

"How did it get away?"

"That I don't know."

"Did you leave the billiard-room?"

"No. Everton came in, and I talked with him for several minutes. When he had gone I was led by curiosity to look at the revolver. I looked, but it was gone!"

"Everton came in, eh?"

"Yes."

"Anybody else?"

"No. That is," added Wayne, with signs of embarrassment, "I think not."

"What do you mean?"

"Everton and I stood by the window and talked awhile, looking out into the grounds. He recommended some change in the arrangement of my young trees, and I am ashamed to say that I forgot my duty."

It would have relieved Doubledark immensely to tell Wayne just what he thought of his stupidity, but he remained perfectly calm.

"Did you hear any foreign sound in the room?"

"No."

"What window did you stand by?"

"The north-east one."

"Which is near the chair where the revolver was; consequently Everton could have reached it. Eh?"

"I suppose so, though I do not remember any strange movement on his part. I was so interested in his advice about the trees—"

"I see, Mr. Wayne. Well, the revolver is gone, and now we will see if we can trace it. I'll go home with you."

Old Doubledark arose and took his hat. In point of fact he was very angry at the man who had let slip such a splendid chance, but his outward composure remained unruffled.

In the meanwhile, Marlowe, giving a headache as an excuse, had left his friends ostensibly to retire to his own room. He was in no mood to see any one, but when he locked his door it was with himself outside, and he hastened secretly to leave the house.

Passing swiftly through the main grounds, he reached the edge nearest the river, and then lay down under a tree and began smoking. Here he passed perhaps an hour in moody thought, when a man approached from the lower bluff.

There was something about him which reminded Allen of the ill-looking fellow who had brought the note to Estelle the day before, and, acting on a sudden impulse, he arose, stepped out and confronted him. Then he saw that it was a different person, but, this man had such a hang-dog look, Allen would not let him pass unchallenged.

"What do you want here?" he demanded.

"Beg yer pardon," was the civil reply, "but is thar a young woman at that air house named Estelle Wayne?"

"Yes."

"Thank you; I was afraid I was bein' sold." He was passing on, but Allen caught his arm.

"Wait! What is your business?"

"I want to see Miss Wayne."

"With what object?"

"Can't tell ye; I really can't. It's private, ye see. I agreed not to tell."

"Agreed to whom?"

"Why, him that give me the letter—that is—a—"

The man stopped in confusion.

"Do you mean to say that some one gave you a letter to deliver to Miss Wayne?"

"I have nothin' to say. Please stand aside and let me go on."

Marlowe extended a bank-note toward his companion.

"Show me that letter, and tell who gave it to you, and this money is yours."

"Would ye bribe me?"

"If possible, yes."

"It ain't the square thing to do."

"But there is money in it."

The messenger glanced cautiously around.

"Give me the money, an' read as quick as ever you can. I don't approve o' this, for I'm an honest man—"

Allen heard no more. He had struck a match and was reading. It was only a note, and quickly read:

"MISS WAYNE:—Please meet me immediately at Eagle Bluff. I think we shall not be interrupted this time. Some precautions may be necessary, however.

SIRROCCO."

It was the same peculiar, stiff writing which had become familiar to Allen, and he turned eagerly to the ragged man.

"Who gave you this?"

"That I don't know, sir. It was a man I met by the bluff. I was walkin' along the railroad track, when out he stepped from a shadow of the cliff an' axed me, would I deliver this; an' as he backed his request with mcney, I was not slow to seize the chance."

"Describe the man."

"Lord bless you! it's only a poor description I can give, for he was all wound up in dry-goods. He wore a big hat, which hid nearly all his head, and his coat-collar came up an' met it. I don't know whether he were black, white or red, but his voice was sharp an' keen. an' I s'pect he was young."

Other questions Marlowe asked, but without

eliciting information, and then he directed the man to go and deliver the note.

When again alone he moved cautiously toward Eagle Bluff, determined to gain position where he could see what occurred.

His conscience rebelled against all this, and he felt low and mean enough, but he met every revolt with the mental reply: "It is for Estelle's sake!" And nothing else could have led him to act the spy, or to bribe messengers.

As mysterious "Sirocco" might be in hiding near at hand, the young man used great care in getting to his own place of concealment. He finally gained a thicket, and there crouched to await the next act in the drama.

Silence reigned along the bluff; there was nothing to show that any one else was near; and ten minutes passed uneventfully.

Then a dark form suddenly came out of the shadows, moving from the direction of Summit View, and Allen knew by the figure and its willowy motions that it was Estelle Wayne.

She reached the bluff, and then another figure suddenly rose and advanced to meet her—that of a man.

Allen set his teeth tightly. At last he had proof of all he had suspected; at last, he hoped, he was on the eve of discovery!

CHAPTER XIII.

ESTELLE MEETS WITH TROUBLE.

"Yes! it is he—Sirocco! At last I have a view of the scoundrel, and though I cannot yet tell what he is like, I may soon know. I feel sure they do not meet as friends, and if he raises a hand against her, I will rush out and seize him, though he be a millionaire or a giant of strength. This night shall unmask him if possible!"

Allen Marlowe bissed these words as he saw Estelle advance toward the man on the bluff. His hands were working nervously, and he longed to start from cover and end the interview before a word was spoken. The idea that this refined, tenderly-reared girl, whom he had always regarded with such reverence, should be compelled to meet a nameless scoundrel under such circumstances was maddening.

Not wholly did he lose his self-control, however, and he remained quiet and waited.

The unknown man advanced toward Estelle, but within two yards of each other, she put out one hand and stopped him.

"That is near enough!" she said, in a quiet, even voice. "I have received your note, and I am here."

"Have yo come alone?" asked the stranger, with a peculiarly thick, coarse utterance.

"Yes."

"An' we are safe from interruption?"

"Yes."

"Because," he added, with a short, uneasy laugh, "I don't want to get arrested."

"I should suppose that would trouble you."

"It does."

"Are you the man I saw at Kenney's?"

"Eh?"

Miss Wayne repeated her question.

"I don't know nothin' about Keuney's—never heard the name before—but you never saw me before. The long an'short on't is—But come nigher the edge of the bluff; there may be some spy hid in them bushes."

He glanced suspiciously toward Allen's covert, but without any real idea that any one was there; and the two drew several paces further away—so far that the spy could overhear nothing.

This was a fresh disappointment, for he had hoped to learn enough to enable him to work for Estelle, whether she was willing or not, and he now glared at the stranger vindictively.

He believed none of the statements made in the previous conversation. This man, whoever he was—it was not Doctor Everton—was undoubtedly the same person who had met Estelle at Kenney's, her statement and his to the contrary notwithstanding.

So thought Marlowe, and he awaited the result of this interview anxiously.

Estelle still showed caution and kept a safe distance between her and the man, but he evinced no desire to decrease it, and they began talking earnestly.

For several minutes nothing reached Marlowe's ears, and he could not bring himself to attempt a nearer advance. He felt ashamed of acting the spy anyway, even though it was for Estelle's sake; and to be detected creeping up to listen to them would forever ruin him in her estimation.

She did not now seem to be the calm, self-possessed woman he had known. She made frequent quick, nervous gestures, and appeared to be energetically opposing some claim on his part.

Allen's blood boiled with indignation.

To what indignity was this fair woman being subjected? What battle was she fighting alone, when he would have almost given his life to help her?

In the old, golden days before trouble came he had ever been alert to shield her from the most trivial annoyance. Now he was banished even from her confidence, and she was compelled to meet a low, brutal wretch at this lone place at a late hour of the evening!

"The scoundrel!" muttered the young man,

grinding his teeth, "I would esteem it a pleasure to throw him over the bluff, and I'll do it if he carries too high a hand!"

At this moment Estelle's voice arose sharply.

"Tell him I will not give a cent!" she cried, defiantly.

The man's answer was unintelligible, and Allen did not hear what she said next, but that one sentence had given him food for thought.

"Tell him I will not give a cent!"

What did it mean? Was the stranger really sincere in what he said at the beginning of the interview? Was he a different man than he who had met Estelle at Neil Kenney's?

Allen remembered the description given by the bearer of the note. It did not apply in the least to the man on the bluff, and it might really be that both had been made instruments of his will, by a man not yet seen by the watching lover.

If so, who was this man who kept in the dark?

Dr. Everton, of course.

Allen answered the mental question promptly, but it was far from satisfying him. If Everton had dark plots to accomplish, why should he make use of so many tools when he was himself on the ground, and might speak with Estelle at any time?

The mystery deepened, and Allen felt more than ever like one groping in the dark, but the scene on the bluff now claimed all of his attention.

Estelle and the stranger had evidently not been able to come to an amicable conclusion, and she once turned away as though to leave him, but he spoke again and she paused.

Only for a moment did this continue; then the girl recoiled, wheeled, and started hurriedly away.

The man made a few quick strides and grasped her arm.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed, in a voice plainly audible to Marlowe; "don't be so fast, my lady! I've borne some sharp talk from you, which should hav been addressed to him who hired me, an' now, by my life, you don't go without givin' me one kiss from them sweet lips!"

The words stung Marlowe almost to fury. Such an insult to one whom he regarded as the fairest of earth's daughters, made his blood boil, and disregarding everything else, he sprung from his cover.

It was but a few steps to where they now were, and he soon covered the distance.

He heard Estelle's indignant, frightened cry: "Villain, let me go!" and the mocking laugh of the stranger, and then he reached their side.

Estelle saw him first, and a glad cry broke from her lips; one word only, and that hisname, but it expressed a good deal.

Another moment and the stranger went to the ground like a log, felled by a resistless blow of Marlowe's nervous arm.

The latter then turned to Estelle, but before he could speak, the fallen man sprung up. The blow had angered more than injured him, and his evil passions took a new turn. He sprung at Allen like a madman, seized and rushed him backward.

"How dare you lay a hand on me, you puny dandy?" he cried, pantingly, and with a volley of curses. "You've tackled the wrong chap now, an' I'll throw ye over the bluff fur crows-meat!"

Estelle uttered a frightened cry. She knew the hight of the bluff at that point, and that a fall over its precipitous edge would almost inevitably result in instant death, and the rough stranger was a much heavier man than Marlowe.

Her heart seemed almost to cease beating from terror.

Allen was by no means similarly affected. He was not only brave but a practiced athlete, and a matter of a few pounds disadvantage did not trouble him.

He checked his own involuntary advance toward the bluff, and returned the stranger's grasp in kind.

A desperate struggle then followed, and Estelle could only stand idle and mutely pray for her defender. All her composure seemed gone, and she was as weak as the weakest of her sex. Such scenes are far from woman's taste, and as she saw the men strive to throw each other over the bluff, an awful terror fell upon her.

Who would win?

She could not tell, for Marlowe seemed to be holding his own bravely, but if her prayers could avail anything there would be no doubt as to the end.

"Oh! Father of mercy!" she whispered, through her white lips, "save him!—save him! Protect him from danger, for I shall die if harm comes to him!"

Did the cry go to the throne of the Ordainer of men's destinies? Who can say? Human ears did reach, and the prayer of her woman's heart stirred Allen Marlowe to fresh efforts.

Was he to be hurled over the cliff when she—the rarest of all women—thus confessed her love for him?

"Never!" he thought, with a battle-fire burning in every vein, and he swept the stranger

resistlessly back and flung him heavily to the ground.

Once there, the man lay without an effort to rise.

"I yield!" he said, sullenly.

Allen turned to Estelle.

"Go on to the house," he quietly directed, "and I will see that you are not followed."

"Come with me," she replied, nervously.

"No. I must not leave here until you are safe. Go, and I will speedily follow. There!

His voice was somewhat peremptory, and she obeyed without further words. Despite Allen's victory, she still had some fear that he would come to harm, but his directions must be obeyed. She went swiftly until at the very door of the house and then suddenly paused.

"What if Allen should ask him to explain?" she cried, aloud. "He has sold his honor once—why not again? How much he knows, I don't know, but he may tell all!"

Whatever this conveyed to her mind, it was enough to make her wring her hands in an agony of fear.

"What is to be done?" she panted. "I would not have him know—But it may not be too late. I will go—I will try to find them!"

Like a startled deer she ran down the path toward the bluff, but when she reached that place there was no sign of the men. The wind whistled dismally through the few trees that crested the point of land, but no human being was visible.

"Which way have they gone?" she thought. "If I lose time in searching for them it may be too late, and I do not know which way to go. Oh! what shall I do?—what shall I do?"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE "INVISIBLE" MAN'S TRAIL.

MARLOWE was no sooner left alone with the evil-looking stranger than he turned and curtly ordered him to rise. The command was sullenly obeyed, and then Allen added:

"Come with me!"

One moment the stranger hesitated, but he finally took the course indicated by the younger man's outstretched hand, and they walked slowly along the bluff.

"Be you goin' ter take me ter jail?" the stranger asked, a defiant inflection to his voice which indicated that he would not be a passive party to such a thing.

"That is for you to decide."

"Fur me?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"I will explain. There are certain questions which I wish you to answer, and if you comply promptly and truthfully, I think we can arrive at a compromise."

"Egad! then you kin count me in for peace an' harmony. I was a fool ter merlest the girl, but she was so pretty, I sorter lost my head."

"All that will be overlooked if you reply to my questions as I said," Allen replied, and he knew he could well afford to make such terms; it would not do to bring the fellow into court and make Estelle's affairs public.

"What d'ye want ter know?"

"What was your business with her this evening?"

The man brightened.

"Is that all you want to know?"

"Yes."

"An' if I tell, you'll let me go free?"

"Yes."

"Then you can bet your last dollar that I will tell. I don't see no need o' gettin' myself into serious trouble for nothin', if I did promise to keep quiet."

"Whom did you promise?"

"Now you have me. 'Twas him who sent me, but I don't know his name from Adam, nor him, neither."

"Do you mean to say that you were merely acting as an agent?"

"I do."

"Remember that you were to tell the truth," Allen impressively said.

"I am tellin' the truth; I swear it by all that's good!" was the energetic reply.

"Yet you say you do not know who hired you."

"No more I don't. Let me tell you just what happened, an' you shall judge for yourself."

"Very well; go on!"

They had now reached a point several rods below Eagle Bluff, and they paused at a secluded spot where bushes and vines ran riot around them. Marlowe leaned against a tree and, looking straight into his companion's face, awaited the promised story.

"I'm gon' to make a clean breast of it," said the stranger, "so you can see that I tell the truth. My name is Luke Adams, and I live at the village below. This forenoon a man who I had never seen come to me, as I was a-workin' in my garden, an' axed me, did I want to make some money? Now, business has been mighty poor with me fur a long time, an' I answered right off that I did, not thinkin' there was a sting behind the fair proposition.

"Well, he made known what he wanted. I

was to meet Miss Estelle Wayne here this evenin' an' demand o' her two thousand dollars. The chap said in an indifferent way that 'twas not at all likely she would have it, but that I must first demand it, and then say, if she refused, that it must be paid *sure* inside three days.

"I didn't fall in with him at once. The idee o' the girl givin' me, a total stranger, so much money seemed absurd, as did the idee that my man would let me receive it, but he made answer that she would not *dare* refuse, an' that he would be near to see that I didn't run away with it.

"It was business I didn't like, for I was afraid o' gettin' arrested, but he talked real nice an' smooth, an' his five-dollar note tempted me. I agreed, got my money in advance an' tried it. You have seen the result, an' I'm feelin' like I'd admire to kick myself for my stupidity."

The man stopped speaking, and Allen said:

"You failed?"

"Yes."

"What did Miss Wayne say?"

She talked a mixture of defiance an' pleadin'. One moment she said she wouldn't give me a cent, an' the next she begged for mercy."

"Why was money demanded of her?"

"That's what I don't know. She didn't give me no clew, an' when I asked him, he wouldn't. I take it he is a blackmailer, though."

Allen frowned darkly. What was there in Estelle Wayne's life which should give a blackmailer any chance to act his detestable part toward her?"

"Do you suppose he was really near when you were holding the interview?"

"He said he would be."

"Then he may be here now."

The stranger glanced nervously around.

"Good Lord! I hope not!" he exclaimed.

"Describe the man!"

"Well, he was an old gentleman, with poor clothes and white hair and beard; but he told me I need not try to find him when he didn't want to be found, for he was so disguised that I could never recognize him."

"Did he say that?"

"Yes; an' he said he was playin' a lone hand—which made it necessary for him to hire me. 'I'm a sort o' invisible person,' said he, an' I must remain so. Nobody must know me!'"

Again Allen frowned; this time more irritably than before.

"What were your impressions of the man?" he slowly asked. "Was he ignorant or educated?"

"Eddicated! Talked like a Yale professor. He wa'n't no fool, either, an' talked up like a man, short an' sharp."

This part agreed with what the bearer of the note had said, and it was plain that the same man had hired both, getting them to do the risky work while he kept in the rear.

Allen was a good deal impressed by the leading villain's assertion that he was an "invisible person" whom none must know, and the young man began to comprehend that a vast plot might be behind all these mysterious moves. The work did not appear like what might be expected from Doctor Everton, and he found himself wondering who this "invisible" man could be, and why he was trying to blackmail Estelle.

Blackmail!

The word had an ugly sound when used in connection with her.

What secret could there be in her life upon which a blackmailer could build the feeblest plot? The lover had always thought her perfect, and this turn of the tide jarred painfully on his nerves.

He suddenly experienced an aversion to further investigation, and somewhat sharply ordered Adams away. It had been his original intention to accompany him to the village, and make sure that he lived there, but he had grown reckless.

He only wanted to be alone.

Without waiting to see if his order was obeyed, Allen himself wheeled and strode back up the bank, his mood a most irritable one. Again and again one question arose in his mind: "What was there in Estelle Wayne's life to make her open to blackmail?" An ugly question it was, and it annoyed him more than anything that had gone before.

"This is too much!" he thought, viciously. "If there was nothing for her to conceal, she would not for a moment consent to be victimized. Her dallying course shows that she really fears the invisible person, who, plainly, is not Doctor Everton. No; I clear him of blame—yet, what meant that scene in the Ghost's Walk? By Jove! this is more than I can, or will, bear; I'll leave Summit View to-morrow!"

When he reached the mansion he saw a light burning in Estelle's room, but, even as he looked, it suddenly went out. She had abandoned the attempt to see him that night and retired—a step which he promptly followed.

They met at the table in the morning, and he noticed that her gaze often sought his face. He, however, looked steadfastly down, avoiding all chance for even casual speech. He had thought better of his resolution to leave Summit View, but was in a rather sulky mood.

He continued to make himself disagreeable after breakfast (lovers and lady-lovers will have such lapses from grace,) and when he saw that Estelle wished to speak with him, he avoided her and promptly left the house.

The next two hours he spent in the Ghost's Walk, and the place, or meditation, or something else, had a beneficial effect on our corsair. His mood grew more amiable, and, finally growing ashamed of himself, he conceived a new idea. Two persons who had seen the "invisible" man had described him; why not visit Neil Kenney's and try to secure more evidence.

"I'll do it, by Jove!" he cried, leaping up.

And straightway he made for the river, entered a boat and pulled across the stream.

Once more he climbed up the hillside toward the blacksmith's house, but not to it. He was passing under a large tree when a voice sounded from the air.

"Hallo, mister!"

Allen came to a sudden halt and looked up. There sat Nick Kenney on a branch of the tree, his feet dangling down, and his head cocked on one side. He looked not unlike a sharp, wise bird, but a good deal more like a wide-awake, saucy boy.

"Good-morning, Nick," Allen pleasantly replied. "Come down!"

"I'm well enough as I am."

"But I want to talk with you."

"Come up here, then."

Allen shook his head, and then Nick suddenly sprung lightly from the tree, struck on his feet, turned a hand-spring, made a military salute—all with startling rapidity—and then stood as grave and sedate as a judge.

"How can I serve you?" he asked.

Marlowe produced a dollar from his pocket.

"Would you mind accepting this?"

"Not in the least," Nick replied, and proved his assertion by stowing the money away in his own pocket.

"Now we can talk freely. You remember my night-visit to your house?"

"Dimly, mister, dimly," Nick replied with a wink.

"You made money that night."

"Not off of you."

"True, but you made it just the same. Who gave it? Whom did Miss Wayne meet at your house?"

"Oh, come off!" was the very impolite reply. "Are you going around on that tack again?"

"I am, Nick. I know Miss Wayne was there, for you will remember that I found her scarf; and there was plenty of corroborative evidence. There is no use of denying it, and I want the information."

Nick plunged his hands so deeply into his pockets as to suggest the possibility of his getting lost there.

"Why not ask Miss Wayne?" he suggested dryly.

"I am asking you, and my money is in your pocket!" sharply replied Marlowe.

"Yes, but it's lonesome there. Misery loves company."

"You shall have company for it, if you will tell all you know."

"Another dollar?"

"Yes."

"Exhibit the finances, and you'll find me a sieve. Cross my palm with another big, white dollar, and the flood of my eloquence will be let loose to devastate and destroy. Produce the bullion, and I'll talk you deaf and—"

Nick suddenly stopped and uttered a yell. A heavy hand had fallen on his shoulder, and a stout switch was falling on his back with a vim which brought a cry at every stroke.

CHAPTER XV.

A NEW LINK IN THE CHAIN.

IT did not trouble Allen to understand the situation. The wielder of the switch was a tall, bony woman, and there could be no doubt that she was Nick's mother. Her blows were so vigorously applied that the young man was about to interfere in Nick's behalf, but the boy proved capable of caring for himself.

With a quick twist of his agile form he left his coat in Mrs. Kenney's grasp—and nothing more. He had escaped, and he ran away with a mocking laugh, but as he went he pointed toward the river with a quick, secret gesture which Marlowe did not fail to understand.

Mrs. Kenney, enraged by the escape of her offspring, turned upon Allen and shook her fist belligerently.

"I'd like to know, my gallows-bird, why you're here?" she cried.

"Madam," he replied, calmly, "there are many things in this world which other scientists than you have vainly sought to know. If your yearning for knowledge meets with no reward, be comforted with the reflection that you are not the only possessor of a mind which reaches for the unfathomable and incomprehensible. I have the honor to wish you good-day!"

Lifting his hat with great politeness and formality, he walked away toward the river. Some angry retort was flung after him, for he had added to Mrs. Kenney's wrath, but it was unheeded.

Plainly, there was nothing to be gained by talking with her, and he would waste no time there.

Nick's course of flight had been nearly at right-angles with his own, but he was of the opinion that the boy would be at the river, and he was not disappointed. Nick was there ahead of him, and he was greeted with the smile peculiar to that boy's sharp face.

"Got out of it alive, didn't you?" he saluted.

"As you see, and now, as your amiable mother may again descend upon you, let us lose no time. Tell me what you know about the night when Estelle Wayne was at your house."

"It's precious little I can tell, for I am not in the heart of the secret," Nick replied, with an injured air. "Kit, my sister, you know, was the captain of that scheme, and she it was who pocketed the wealth."

"Whose wealth?"

"Now, you have me! But I'll tell all I know. I happened on the first part of the scheme when I overheard Kit talking with a man in the woods. He seemed to be a man of middle age, with red hair and beard, but that was all gammon. You can't fool me very easily. I know he was disguised, and a younger man than he seemed. He was educated, too, and spouted like a preacher."

"Did he give a name?"

"Not a blessed name did I hear, and I didn't hear much more, either. All I caught was that he wanted our house for a night interview between Estelle Wayne and a man, but the man wasn't to be him. 'I'm to keep out of sight; to be wholly invisible,' he explained."

Again the hand of the "invisible" man!

"Go on!" Allen tersely directed.

"That's all I learned then, but as the folks were to be away, Kit got me to help her. I tried to get more light, but she was as close-mouthed as an oyster; not a thing did I learn, except that she was mostly working in the dark. She got paid for furnishing a place for the interview, but they didn't let her into the secret at all, at all! Well, they met, you know, and you interrupted the interview almost at the start."

"Did you hear any part of it?"

"Not a word."

"You saw the man. Who was he?"

"Give it up! A sleek-looking young chap, who looked as though he had a dash of negro blood. When you pounded the front door out of shape, they escaped by the rear. I let them out, and 'twas me who did all that screaming."

"And this is all you know?"

"Every word."

"Where is your sister, Kit?"

"Gone away on a visit."

"When will she return?"

"Don't know. You might ask Estelle Wayne."

"Does she know?"

"Probably not. I only threw it out as a suggestion."

Further questions Allen asked, but without success. Nick seemed to be answering frankly, and Allen could well believe that one of his years would not be taken into the confidence of desperate plotters. He, however, agreed to give the boy a liberal reward for any accurate information, and then they parted.

Allen entered his boat and pulled away. Nick remained on the bank, watching him, and, when several yards intervened between them, suddenly raised his voice.

"You may have a surprise when you get home, mister."

"How so?"

"Never mind!"

This reply was accompanied by a laugh, and the boy then wheeled, ran up the bank and disappeared among the trees.

Allen had ceased rowing, but he now resumed and soon crossed the river. Nick's parting words were soon forgotten in what seemed more important thoughts. The late interview had brought him little information, save that it served to throw stronger, darker shadow on Estelle's mysterious, "invisible" enemy. Who was the man? Allen no longer connected Doctor Everton with him. Despite the scenes in the Ghost's Walk, he could not believe that the doctor was this secret enemy.

The case grew darker every hour, and Marlowe knew not which way to turn.

Reaching the Summit View grounds, he was pursuing his way along the winding paths when he came upon a group composed of Everton, Clara Raynor, Estelle and one other person; and the sight of this latter person brought him to an amazed halt.

It was Kit Kenney!

Kit Kenney, and at Summit View! More than this, the girl barbarian was just handing a light shawl to Miss Wayne, after which she retreated toward the house. She had eyes which overlooked nothing, and was the first to see Allen. She flashed him one quick, bright, mocking smile, and then went demurely on her way.

The voice of Doctor Everton rose banteringly:

"Upon my word, Miss Wayne, I rather admire your new maid, though she seems more fit for a Gypsy band than service with a lady."

"I don't think, Estelle, that you will like her as well as Emma," said Clara.

"She will do quite well," Miss Wayne serenely replied.

"But Emma has been so long in your service."

"It is well to have a change occasionally. By the way, why not change the subject? Doctor Everton, you are hindering Clara with her work. Why not encourage her in industry?"

Allen Marlowe had heard enough to explain the presence of Kit Kenney at Summit View, and Nick's mysterious parting words. Kit had come to the summer mansion as Estelle's maid.

Nick had said well when he declared that a surprise awaited the young man, but it was more. Allen felt sure that Estelle had never willingly taken Kit into her service. The daughter of the barbarians was bright and sharp, but she was more skilled at rowing a boat, or climbing a tree, than in serving a lady. And, Emma, the former maid, had been Miss Wayne's attendant for years.

"Again the invisible hand!" thought Marlowe, grinding his teeth. "Her mysterious enemy is not content with sending Tom, Dick and Harry as messengers, but he must have a spy in the very house. It is maddening!"

Not yet had he been seen by the group before him, and he suddenly wheeled, stalked away from them and toward the house. He felt unable to control himself then, and was determined to take shelter in his own room, but he was not to escape so easily.

Gordon Brentwood, student and detective, suddenly appeared in his path.

"How do you do, Mr. Marlowe?" asked the neighbor, politely. "May I trouble you to pause for a moment while I address you?"

Allen's dislike for Old Doubledark had moderated somewhat, and he now had no worse opinion of him than that he was a moldy fossil who was not always agreeable. He had been on the point of hurrying past, but the last words caused him to pause reluctantly.

"Say on!" he briefly directed.

"I hope you will not be offended," the disguised detective continued, "but I am about to offer my services to you. There are, as you may be aware, some odd things occurring around Summit View, and two heads are better than one to ferret out a mystery. Wait a moment, Mr. Marlowe; do not be offended. I mean well, and you may find my aid of value."

Allen looked at the speaker with a frown.

"Have I expressed a wish for aid?" he demanded.

"No."

"Are you not a little fast in offering any?"

"I trust, young man, that I am not given to thoughtless interference; and if I offer my services, it is because I am anxious and capable of doing good."

"Do you think I need help?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"You are in trouble; you are wrestling with a mystery which baffles you. As I said before, two heads are better than one, and there is strength in union. I may know something about the case not known to you, whereas I am sure you know much that I do not know. Why shouldn't we confide in each other and work together?"

Doubledark was speaking persuasively, but his words seemed to make no impression upon Allen.

"What is the 'case' to which you refer?" he asked, very stiffly.

"The mystery surrounding Miss Wayne," the detective answered, bluntly.

Marlowe's face flushed.

"You will excuse me, sir," he tartly responded, "but I think the lady you mention is quite capable of looking to her own affairs. Interference from you or me would be unjustifiable, and I decline to discuss the matter further with you."

With this ungracious ultimatum Allen abruptly resumed his progress, and Doubledark was left alone. The latter made a slight grimace.

"I've made a failure and put my foot in it," he thought. "I might have known this cranky youngster would decline aid. I must see Wayne and undo the mischief."

CHAPTER XVI.

A RUDE INTERRUPTION.

OLD DOUBLEDARK went at once to Edward Wayne's private room. The master of Summit View was not in, but he soon arrived.

"What success?" he asked.

"Poor," the detective answered. "I saw Marlowe, but utterly failed to impress him. Our conversation was short, for I saw that he was not to be moved. Are you ready to tell a good, sound falsehood for me?"

"Yes."

Wayne answered promptly. He had been deeply mortified by the loss of the revolver he had been set to guard, and was ready to make amends at all hazards. Doubledark had not given up all hope of recovering the mysterious

weapon, but the host had. They had searched the billiard-room, after their return, but failed to find any clew. Wayne felt sure that the guilty person, be he Everton, or some one else, had before then secreted the revolver where it would never be found. Doubledark was not so sure of this. Criminals, he well knew, often held fast to articles they knew would put them under suspicion, if found, and it was not likely that the owner of the revolver was aware that other eyes had seen it.

"What is the work?" Wayne added.

"I may have created alarm in Marlowe's mind by intimating that Miss Wayne is in trouble. I had the means of remedy planned before I spoke; it is for you to do the work."

"Tell me how?"

"Go to Marlowe at once and say that a certain doctor—name him what you will, but use no real name—has asked our leave to operate upon Judge Wayne, with a view of curing him of his mental troubles, but that you hesitate because the remedy is dangerous and may do more harm than good. Say that Estelle is wavering between hope and fear, and uncertain what she ought to do; and that she is in consequent deep distress of mind."

Wayne started up.

"I'll do it!" he agreed.

"Wait a bit! Add that the project is thus far a secret between you, myself, and her; that it must remain a secret; and that he must under no circumstances mention it, least of all to Estelle."

"You shall be obeyed to the letter."

"Go and find him at once, then."

Wayne left the room, and Doubledark sat down to wait. It was twenty minutes later when the host returned, but he came with a cheerful expression.

"It's done!" he announced.

"Did Marlowe believe you?"

"Implicitly, and he fell into the trap. He said you had been talking strangely to him, and seemed to be relieved by the explanation. He also promised not to breathe a word to any one."

"The guns are spiked," Doubledark calmly announced. "It was necessary to silence him, though I fancy we shall soon confide in him fully."

"Then you really believe he is to be regarded as free from all suspicion?"

"I do; but we must still be cautious. Say not a word to him that can create trouble. This is one of the most intricate cases I ever handled, simply because I know not the contemplated crime or the man to suspect."

"You would have known, only for my stupidity in letting the revolver be taken away."

"I will be frank enough to say that I think the identity of the criminal would have been known if you had not let the revolver slip, but that need not trouble us. 'Spilt milk' can't be recovered; we must reach out for a new grip."

"Have you any hope?"

Doubledark raised his brows in surprise.

"I haven't the slightest doubt; we are going to triumph in the end. It is very annoying to be so much in the dark, and to progress so slowly—and you may, possibly, think me a stupid detective—but the peculiarities of the case render more than one course out of the question. We must be quiet, patient and watchful; we can do no more."

"Having cleared Marlowe, do you now suspect any one?"

"My attention is on Everton, but I will not condemn him unheard. Marlowe is innocent. I chanced to overhear some talk between him and a boy near the river, to-day, which enlightened me somewhat—but let that drop. Where is Marlowe now?"

"Gone to his room, leaving strict orders that he be not disturbed under any pretense."

Doubledark looked thoughtful. The conversation he had overheard had been that between Allen and Nick, just after Mrs. Kenney's assault, and it had opened a wide field of conjecture in the detective's mind. He knew that Allen was in trouble, and thought he should soon take the young man wholly into his confidence.

He believed he had a clew to some part of the mystery, but he would make no reckless haste.

He had judged well in thinking that Allen was in a miserable mood. The whole world seemed hateful to the latter, and he went to his room, and despite the fact that there was twice a rap at the door, kept it until the hour of the six o'clock dinner. There Warburton managed to say that he wished to talk in private, and they were soon together in the billiard-room.

"I knocked at your door twice, to-day," said Hugh, abruptly.

"Indeed! Had I known it was you I should have answered, for I heard the knocking; but I did not think of its being you, I was too wretched for calm or coherent thought."

"Still thinking of Estelle?" uttered Warburton, with a sympathetic sigh.

"Yes. By the way, what about that maid of hers—the female barbarian from over the river. I would as soon see a snake here as her. It is a part of the plot against Estelle."

"Do you think so?"

"Emphatically, I do!" Marlowe replied; and

then he told of his interview with Nick, and his latest discoveries.

Warburton paced the room in thoughtful silence for several moments, and then he came to a stop in front of his friend.

"I, too, have made a discovery to-day, and it was because of that I desired to see you this afternoon. As I was denied admittance I employed my time by writing what I had to tell, and I will now give you the paper to read, rather than to tell you, for the ladies may take a notion to look us up and so overhear our conversation. I will take a half-way position, near them, and act as sentinel. Here is the paper—read!"

"You plan is a good one. Go and keep off intruders, and I will soon join you."

Hugh disappeared, and Allen drew close to the window, for in the fading light of day he could nowhere else see to read.

The paper was as follows:

"Let me tell briefly what I saw.

"It was late in the afternoon, and I was lying in the shade of low bushes, when Doctor Everton and Miss Wayne met near my covert—as the place really was, though not so intended. He stopped her and said:

"So your new maid has arrived?"

"The fresh indignity is accomplished," she replied, looking at him with eyes which would have frozen a common man, so full were they of scorn.

"Oh! I think you will find Kit useful," he carelessly replied.

"Useful in helping you!" she retorted.

"Well, why else was she placed here?"

"George Everton! you are a scoundrel," she exclaimed, and I saw her hands move restlessly, nervously.

"He paused to light a cigar with the utmost nonchalance, and an air which was an insult to her.

"Don't throw stones," he finally replied, with a lazy utterance which did not hide the lurking devil in his words. "You know what I am, and what you are! So do I, and one word from me would send you to prison. There is a law to punish such offenses as yours, but I should really dislike to summon it to my aid, for after all, the bond between us is no trifle, trampled under foot by you though it is, and has been."

"I will never recognize it," she cried.

"Had you rather go to prison?"

"I had rather die!" she passionately exclaimed.

"I prefer that you live, and obey me!" he answered, in a cold, measured voice.

"I verily believe that I was on the threshold of the great discovery, but at that moment the Misses Raynor appeared in the path, and I saw Estelle hurriedly thrust a white paper into the doctor's hand.

"Take this," she said, "and read it in your own room. It will explain more than I can say now—it may move you to pity!"

"The last words were feverishly uttered, but no more could be said, because of the arrival of Eddila and Clara.

"One thing I noticed which escaped the attention of all the others. When Everton received the paper, he made a motion to put it in his pocket, and believed he had done so; but it had fallen in the grass and twigs, just beyond the path, and lay there unseen by either of the quartette.

"They moved away together, and then I secured the paper. It proved to be an envelope, tightly sealed. At last I held it in my hand, I believed, a clew to the mystery, and as you had summoned me to Summit View to help solve it, I felt exultant. My hand was on the seal, and another moment would have seen it broken open, when I was checked by two thoughts. It was a despicable act to open a lady's private letter. But I thought of you, Allen, and my conscience hardened. Again my hand touched the seal, and again I stopped. It was for you, not for me, to open the letter, and learn the truth.

"I put the letter away in my pocket, and you will find it inclosed here. It is for you to open."

So ended Warburton's manuscript, but the other envelope was in Allen's hand. Should he open it? A most trivial circumstance led him to decide quickly.

The fading light had grown duller, and only a few minutes remained in which to read. To stop to bathe with his conscience would be to lose the light, and he tore the envelope open quickly.

Several sheets of paper lay before him in compact form, and he quickly began reading the firm, beautiful writing of the upper one—Estelle's writing. It began abruptly:

"I feel that it will be a waste of time to appeal to you for mercy, yet appeal I must and will. Were I to suffer alone, I would never bow my neck to the yoke, but for the sake of my poor old father, Uncle Edward and his wife, and the family name, I will thrust my pride aside, and tread it under foot."

"Humbly I come to you, pleading for mercy—"

Allen Marlowe did not read further then. He never read further. Something heavy seemed

to fall on his head—it might have been the weight of a murderous blow—and he lay upon the floor as unconscious as the tree which waved its branches before the window.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MAID HAS SOMETHING TO SAY.

SOME minutes passed, and the billiard-room grew darker as the light of the sinking sun faded entirely away and the sky grew dull and dark save for a little tinge of red at the west, which threw a strangely-beautiful border around the black clouds that hung, thunder-charged at the horizon.

All this came to pass and night was over and around Summit View, but Allen Marlowe saw it not, nor did he see the later rush of light in the billiard-room.

When consciousness returned he was still lying upon the floor and Hugh Warburton was working over him anxiously. He had used water profusely to effect a cure. Allen opened his eyes and put one hand languidly to his head.

"In heaven's name! what has happened?" cried Hugh, in blank surprise. "What caused you to faint?"

Allen started and struggled to his feet.

"The letter!" he exclaimed, looking around. "Where is it?"

"I haven't seen it. Isn't it in your pocket?" Hugh asked.

"No; it is not in my pocket," Allen replied, as he began a search in which his friend joined.

The room was looked through and nothing found.

"It is as I thought!" uttered Marlowe, through his teeth. "We may search until doom's day and be none the better off. He who struck me down with an assassin's blow has also stolen the letters to the last scrap!"

Warburton recoiled, and his face looked strangely pale in the glare of the lamp.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed, "do you mean to say that some one has been here? That—"

"I mean to say that, when I was reading the letter, an unseen hand dealt me a blow which stunned me, and that whoever struck the blow has also stolen the letters."

"This is almost incredible, and yet—yet—I thought it very strange that you should swoon. Let me go out and search for the—"

Allen imperatively motioned to a chair.

"Sit down!" he directed. "Pursuit is now out of the question, for he has had time to get a couple of miles away. Let us compare notes. I have been robbed of that most valuable letter while it was yet unread. I finished yours, and had just begun Estelle's, when I was stricken down, senseless. Now tell me what you have seen."

"Nothing that can help in the case. When I left here I went out, talked a while with Eddila Raynor, and then came here. The room was in total darkness, but I lit the lamp and then saw you. I thought you had fainted and labored to resuscitate you. You know the rest."

"There was no sign of the letters?"

"Not the least. I supposed they were in your pocket. Are you sure they are not there now?"

"Certainly. He who struck me did it to secure the letters, and his end was accomplished. Where is Doctor Everton?"

"I don't know."

"Was he with the ladies?"

"No."

Allen was silent for a moment, and then Hugh slowly added:

"Am I to infer that you suspect him?"

"You are to infer just that. How he gained a clew to the fact that I had his letter I don't know, and that part is immaterial, but I do believe he was the assailant and thief."

"By Jove! let us go and confront him at once!" cried Warburton, an indignant flush rising to his face.

"No!" decisively replied Marlowe. "We will do nothing of the kind. There are two reasons against it. First, I could not very well make trouble with him for striking me when I was reading a private letter belonging to him. Secondly, we know at last, positively, that he is the author of Estelle's unhappiness. He is not so 'invisible' as he was, and we shall be able to work against him to advantage. He must know that I did not read far enough in his letter to learn his secret, and he will carry his head just as high as ever—until we bring it low!"

"There is something to that," Hugh admitted, after a pause.

"Now let us consider your own revelations as given in your letter. First, it is clear that Kit Kenney was placed here as Estelle's maid by his orders, though it is doubtful if Kit suspects who her master is."

"True; he is probably making her a blind instrument of his will. But why has he placed her here? It seems to me, with a double motive: to spy on Miss Wayne, and to convey messages between them."

"Very likely. But now let us consider his other words. As nearly as I can remember, he asserted that she had been guilty of a crime for which he could send her to prison if he would. Am I right?"

"Such were his words, but I decline to believe them."

"Carefully, Hugh. You want me to think well of Estelle. Put that behind you and speak only your candid opinion. We must admit that he has a strong hold upon her. Were it not for that, she would never have tamely listened to such charges from his lips. There is not a person living who has more of a certain kind of pride—that which has its being at the root of honor—than Estelle Wayne. Had his charge been groundless, she would have repudiated it with indescribable scorn and indignation."

Hugh looked at the flickering light in somber silence.

"We must admit the secret hold, and that there is cause for it," Allen added, "but one thing I still assert. Whatever the shadow which falls across Estelle Wayne's life, I will still believe her innocent of all deliberate wrongdoing!"

He made the assertion emphatically, and Hugh warmly grasped his hand.

"Spoken like a true man, and greatly to your honor. I fancy I am no mean student of human nature, and I would willingly swear to her innocence."

"I would stake my life on it!"

With these words Marlowe abruptly arose.

"Come," he continued, "let us join the ladies and, mind you, not a word of this to any one."

"I will be as silent as the grave."

They went to the parlor. Estelle, Clara and Eddila were there, but not Doctor Everton. Eddila saw fit to pretend to be highly indignant because, as she expressed it, the gentlemen "went off to mope over their cigars and catch cold alone, leaving everybody else to break their hearts in solitude," but the sally produced no effect on Allen. He looked only at Estelle. She was paler than usual, and seemed weary and sad. He wondered that nobody else noticed her mood, and went and sat by her side.

He was kind enough then to make no remark which could wound her. He spoke on indifferent subjects, and chose the lightest possible, hoping to draw a smile back to her face.

The ease with which he succeeded surprised him. Weary, hopeless and in trouble she might be, but she was still the same calm, resolute woman outwardly. When he supposed her crushed, he erred. Had she been a queen in reality, instead of a regal woman in private life, she would have played the destinies of nations on the checker-board of diplomacy and won or lost with the same calm smile.

They were sitting together, talking with forced gayety, when Doctor Everton entered the room.

Allen saw him at once, and saw, too, that the doctor was passing a handkerchief across his face as though to clear away perspiration occasioned by rapid movements. He stopped suddenly, however, as he saw the couple by the piano, and then his heavy brows knit in a scowl.

A murderous look it was that he shot at them, if Allen read it aright, and Estelle paused in the midst of a sentence. Allen glanced at her. A shadow was on her face, and a look the young man was at a loss to interpret, but it was only momentary. The shadow passed, she nodded pleasantly to Everton, and then finished her sentence with a steady voice.

Contrary to Allen's expectations, Everton did not join them. He passed them, muttering something about consulting a medical work, and took a book from a shelf. Then he went out again. As he passed Allen, the latter made two peculiar discoveries.

First: The book the doctor held had the word, "Shakespeare" plainly stamped across the back. It was an odd "medical" work to consult, and from the vague way he had taken it from the shelf, Allen suspected that the matter of the book had been but an excuse.

Secondly: Upon the hand which held the book Allen noticed a slight abrasion of the cuticle on one knuckle. This was more significant than the other fact, and Allen wondered if it had been made at the same time that that right hand struck him down in the billiard-room.

The doctor showed himself no more that evening, and, after a rather dull conversation in general, three of the party were seized with a desire to retire—at least, so they said.

Estelle mentioned it first, Marlowe followed, and Eddila was the third to say as much, glancing at Hugh and Clara as she spoke. In point of fact, it had become clear to her that her sister and Mr. Warburton were treading on the shores of love—or flirtation—and she would not be the obstacle in the way.

All except the young couple left the room, probably to the relief of Clara and Hugh, but Allen Marlowe did not retire. He made a feint of going to his room, and then went, instead, to the billiard-room. The place had suddenly gained a fascination over him, which was the only way to account for his going there. He did not touch a cue, but sat down where he had been sitting when struck down, lit a cigar and gave himself to thought.

He would have given almost any sum to know what was in the stolen letter beyond the

point to which he had read, but he had no doubt that Doctor Everton had before him destroyed it, and he could only hope that he would some time have the pleasure of repaying his assailant in his own coin.

He was thus thinking when the door opened, some one glided in, closed the door and confronted him.

Allen rose in wonder.

The intruder was Emma, the maid displaced by Kit Kenney in Miss Wayne's service, and her conduct was unexplainable by any natural surmise.

"If you please, sir," said the girl, "may I speak to you?"

"Certainly," he courteously replied.

"Well, sir, it's about Miss Wayne, and—and the way she has cast me off for that thing!"

Emma had been twisting the string of her neat little apron, and she now gave it a particularly vicious twist, as though she wished it was Kit Kenney's neck instead.

"I beg your pardon," replied Allen, quickly, "but I must decline to listen to anything of the kind. It is a matter between you and Miss Wayne."

"Don't be so sure!" retorted Emma. "You love her, and, maybe, you will feel interested to know that she and that black Kit are going to receive a man secretly in this house at a very late hour—secretly, mind you, and a total stranger to every one else!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SECRET VISITOR.

ALLEN MARLOWE started. He considered it beneath his position as an honorable man to listen to a servant who would slander a present, or past, employer, but this particular servant had found a way to rivet his attention at the outset.

A brief silence followed her last words, but Allen looked at her attentively and did not advance any more of his high notions of honor.

Emma was a plain young woman who had always been considered good-hearted and honest. She had served Miss Wayne several consecutive years, and always faithfully and skillfully. When she was discharged without reason, and replaced by Kit Kenney, the fact that she had been given a good recommendation, and a chance to remain at Summit View until she secured a new place, did not prevent jealousy and revenge finding place in her heart.

Allen realized this, but he was impressed by what she said.

"Do you know what you are talking about?" he finally asked.

"I do, sir."

"How do you know?"

"I've got ears!"

"Then you have been listening?"

Emma flushed.

"Call it what you will, sir; I haven't any love for that half-wild creature Miss Estelle has put in my place. A fine companion she is for Miss Estelle—one of the Kenneys from over the river, and she knows no more!"

"Excuse me, Emma; I do not care to listen to this. You say that a man is coming here tonight. Who is he, and why is he coming?"

"I don't know who he is, but I overheard Miss Estelle and her black girl talking, and I made out that somebody was coming at eleven o'clock; and that the Kenney creature was going to admit him at the east door—to see Miss Estelle!"

"What is his business?"

"That I don't know, but Miss Estelle is vexed over it—vexed and troubled, sir—and I heard her say that she wished he was at the bottom of the sea." I suppose she meant the man who was coming."

Allen paced nervously across the room, and then paused.

"Why have you come to me with this story?"

"Because you love her!" Emma bluntly replied.

"And you want to injure her in my estimation?"

Emma opened her lips, hesitated, and then burst into tears.

"It's awful mean, I know," she finally answered between her sobs, "but I can't help it."

"Suppose I should put your information to the test, and prove it unreliable?"

"I heard what I did hear, and that's all I know about it; but I'm going to watch the east door," she replied, ceasing to sob and growing dogged.

"So will I," Allen replied. "That far I will go, to test your information, but no further. From the moment the visitor enters the east door, I am done with him. I can not, will not, act the spy further. If Miss Wayne and the Kenney girl receive a visitor thus, it is because he has some business, legal or mercantile, to transact. As soon as he passes the door I am done with the role of spy."

Mr. Marlowe spoke quite loftily, and, perhaps, with cause. His scrupulousness was something quite new to him, so far as this case was concerned, and something to be proud of, certainly.

Seriously, the wretched young man was ashamed of so much underhand work, good though the motive was, and he would not lower himself too far in the presence of a servant.

Eleven o'clock was drawing near, and he announced that he would go outside at once and take position near the door. Emma hesitated a moment and then observed that, as Allen seemed to care so little about it, she believed she would retire to her room. Allen hesitated, in turn, and said that it was the best thing she could do.

He knew, however, that she would do nothing of the kind.

Feeling as she did, she would let no chance pass to learn more about the mysterious visitor.

Allen was soon outside, stationed under a tree.

"I wonder if a man was ever before in such contemptible business?" he bitterly thought. "I can conceive of nothing more mean and low than for a man to spy upon a woman, but Heaven knows that if I was consulting my own interests, only, I would never do it—I would leave Summit View at once. If I sneak about at night, and all that sort of thing, it is for her—for her!"

He drew what consolation he could from this thought, and remained impatiently waiting. He dared not strike a match to look at his watch, and time seemed to creep far past eleven. In point of fact, his watch indicated just that hour when footsteps sounded on the hard walk, and a man approached the house.

Somewhat to Allen's surprise, the stranger's manner was not furtive. He went calmly, openly, to the east door and knocked. It was promptly opened.

The light beyond was very dim, but Allen recognized Kit Kenney. A very few words passed between her and the stranger, after which he entered, and the door was relocked.

Marlowe drew a long, quivering sigh. He had proof of all that Emma had alleged, and the unknown man was in the house. But was he there to see Miss Wayne?

For a moment Allen was tempted to disregard his resolution and try to learn more, but he resisted the impulse stubbornly, and walked slowly around the house, to re-enter it by the front door.

In so doing he passed under the windows of Estelle's room. Glancing up he saw that a light burned within, and the shadows of two figures were thrown on the white curtains—one on each.

One of these shadows was that of a man!

That settled the last doubt; Emma had told the truth as far as she knew; the man had come to see Estelle.

As Allen looked a third shadow was thrown on the curtain, beside the man's, and an arm extended to receive something from the visitor. Beyond a doubt it was that of Kit Kenney, and she had taken the man's hat.

Allen waited for no more. With long strides he made his way to the front door, admitted himself, went to his room and retired for the night.

"I will investigate no more, and I will leave Summit View to-morrow!" he declared.

Let no one censure him for the sudden change of mind. Who could be steadfast and logical under such circumstances? Love is a destroyer of mental quiet, even when propitious, and when he dips his darts in poison they spread a fever to the whole system which no one can resist.

If Allen Marlowe was inconsistent, he was no worse than the majority of his sex.

Strangely enough, his opinion had not changed in the morning, and he arose strong in the determination to announce his purpose at lunch, and to go soon after—and return no more.

This resolution he intended to announce to Hugh Warburton as soon as he saw him in private, but before this opportunity occurred the ex-maid, Emma, swooped down upon him.

Everything was favorable for a private conversation, but, divining her purpose, he raised one hand warningly.

"I don't want to hear a word!" he said, firmly.

"But, sir, you must, for Miss Estelle is in serious trouble," persisted Emma, her eyes filled with tears.

She had found the straight, broad way to his heart and his attention, and his peremptory manner at once disappeared.

"How do you know?"

"I—I listened!"

"And—heard—what?"

There was a long pause after each word, for the young man was literally speaking against his will. One inclination prompted him to question the girl, and another strongly reproached him for doing so.

"Well, sir," Emma replied, "I heard a good deal less than I wanted to, and just enough to perplex me. The strange man did not stay long, and what they said seemed to be of the commonest kind, though there was a good deal of talk about 'two thousand dollars'."

"Ah! what about two thousand dollars?"

"That I don't know, except that it seems she was to give him that for something—"

"Relate in detail just what you heard."

Emma hesitated for a moment, and then replied:

"Well, sir, I'll do the best I can. I went to the outside of the door as soon as I dared, after the man went in, and the first voice I heard was Miss Estelle's."

"Let me see them, please," she said.

"There was a brief silence, and then she added:

"Are they really as good as this?"

"You can see for yourself, and I assure you that you will get nothing else. You will deceive every one, miss, and you will not be the first to do so. Such deceptions are common; how common, the world little suspects."

"And I am at liberty to exchange at any time?"

"Whenever you see fit, miss. We hold ourselves ready to obey your notice at any time."

"Just then," Emma proceeded, "that black barbarian girl came quite close to the door, and I ran away in fright. I did not venture back for several minutes. When I did Miss Estelle and the stranger were talking about the money. There was some talk about the sum, which I could not by any means understand, but it was settled at two thousand dollars, and then he rose to go. Altogether he was not there half an hour."

The barbarian showed him out, and then she went back to Miss Estelle. My mistress spoke up sharply, and says she: 'You can go; I don't want any more of you to-night.' And then that crafty cat says: 'I hope you don't feel hard toward me?' and Miss Estelle very properly replied: 'Did you hear my directions?'

"Oh! Mr. Marlowe, it just did me good to hear her speak, for it seemed as though her tone would freeze the barbarian—I never could have endured it. The Wayne pride and severity are just terrible when they get started. The old judge could scare people out of their wits, and Miss Estelle is just like him. But the barbarian hasn't got any wits, and was not frightened.

"I heard your directions, and I will obey," she answered, "but I tell you fairly that when you look upon me as your enemy, you do me wrong."

"And then the wily serpent left the room, and I only escaped discovery by doing some quick dodging. Well, the barbarian went to bed, and then I crept back to Miss Estelle's door and listened again. She was crying, and I heard her say: 'The burden is more than I can bear!'

"Mr. Marlowe, it just went to my heart, and from that moment all my anger died out. She had discharged me, but she suffered more than I did. I forgive the poor darling, and I advise you to do the same, sir."

Allen walked the length of the hall and back in a nervous, yet thoughtful way. The last good advice was thrown away; he not only had no ill-will toward Estelle, but did not hear the advice. He heard only what was important.

"You have no idea of the nature of what Miss Wayne bought?"

"Not the ghost of an idea," Emma replied.

"Are you sure she bought anything?"

"Certainly. She examined them, and commented on their appearance—whatever 'them' and 'their' refer to."

"Bought them at an expense of two thousand dollars?"

"Yes, sir."

"She has an abundance of jewelry?"

"Millions of it," was the somewhat vague reply. "Besides, sir, would she buy jewelry in that way?"

"Perhaps she would, to present to you."

"She has already given me more than many fine ladies have, sir; more than a lady's maid can wear."

"Unquestionably, then, her purchase was of papers. Did you not hear the rattling, rustling of paper while—"

Allen suddenly stopped. Emma had darted from his side to an adjacent door, and a brief struggle was followed by her reappearance with Kit Kenney as a captive. The barbarian had played the listener and come to grief.

CHAPTER XIX.

"I WISH YOU TO REMAIN."

THERE was a pause during which nobody spoke. Allen Marlowe could not speak; he stared at the daughter of the barbarians in dismay. Clearly, she had been listening to all, and had detected him receiving the tattling of a servant who had played the spy from a motive of revenge. Clearly, too, the barbarian would go straight to Miss Wayne with this news.

Never noticing his mood, and filled with triumph at having caught her hated enemy so neatly, Emma sarcastically cried:

"Here she is, sir, and pretty business she has been in! Oh! you needn't think you can spy on me, and not get caught! I'm enough for a Gypsy, any day!"

Kit, who had not for a moment lost composure, burst into a merry laugh. Emma still held her by the arm, and seemed to think she had a helpless prisoner, but if the truth must be told, three like her could not have held the mountain girl if the latter had been disposed to resist.

"How virtuous we are!" mocked the barbarian. "Don't reproach me too much until you get the story fairly told to Al Marlowe of how you spied on Miss Wayne last night."

"Al Marlowe!" cried Emma. "What shameful familiarity."

"Oh, not at all, Miss Chalk-Face! Mr. Marlowe knew me before I was a servant, but nobody knew you before you were a servant but your nurse, I think."

"Oh, you black-faced creature!"

Emma tried to make the last word express several volumes, but it expressed nothing but passion. Thus far Allen had silently listened, feeling ready to sink with shame, but he now interrupted sharply:

"That will do! This quarrel has been carried quite far enough. Emma, will you please retire?"

Emma had not quite lost all reason, and, being under the impression that Marlowe would just about annihilate the barbarian, she agreed with remarkable readiness and vanished in the same way.

Allen turned to Kit.

"You will tell Miss Wayne what you have heard?"

The barbarian tossed her head.

"What will you give me to keep silent?" she retorted.

"Nothing! I order you to tell your mistress all."

"I tell you, my choleric gentleman, but I take no orders from you!" Kit retorted, but her manner was more bright than saucy.

"I request you to tell her."

"I decline."

"Then I shall tell her myself!"

"Oh! very well," was the airy reply, "if you will be hung, do for goodness' sake give me the pleasure of putting the rope around your neck. I'll tell her!"

"At once."

"Yes."

"Come with me to the library for a moment."

Kit obeyed, and Allen hurriedly, nervously, wrote the following note:

"MISS WAYNE:—After hearing the story just told you by the Kenney girl you will see that I am too deeply disgraced to dare meet you again. Farewell! Estelle, for we shall probably never meet again. In the future pray think of me as one who meant better than he acted. If I have seemed to do unmanly things from a mean, prying disposition, let me assure you appearances are against me. For all I have done I offer but one excuse—I love you! I leave Summit View within the hour.

"Always yours,
"ALLEN MARLOWE."

Placing this brief letter in an envelope he sealed it and advanced to Kit.

"You promise to tell Miss Wayne all?"

"Yes."

"Then do so at once, and when it is done, give her this letter. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly! No doubt it will delight her. If she looks as sweet and interesting as you did when writing it, we shall have a cyclone, or blizzard, or devastating earthquake, rattling bricks down on top our heads mighty soon!"

With this characteristic remark Kit went leaping up the stairs, whistling a hunting-song to the great horror of Mr. Edward Wayne's valet, who was just coming down.

Kit was regarded by the other servants with about the degree of love a family of kittens feel for a dog. They were afraid of her, while her utter disregard of common politeness filled them with consternation. Such an ill-bred person had never before shed malignant influence over their lives, and they wondered greatly at Miss Wayne's strange taste.

Allen Marlowe went straight to his own room and began packing his trunk. He had just entered the preliminary stage—confusion—when there was a knock at the door. He opened it, and saw Miss Kit Kenney.

"If you please, Mr. Marlowe, Miss Wayne sends her regards and wishes to see you at once—or something of that sort," the barbarian indifferently observed.

Allen hesitated, glanced toward his writing-desk, and ended by following Kit. He was escorted to Miss Wayne's parlor, where she received him with perfect self-possession.

She held up the letter.

"Was this written in earnest, Mr. Marlowe?" she gravely asked.

"It was, Miss Wayne."

"And you intend to leave Summit View?"

"I do."

"I wish you to remain!"

He looked at her sharply, eagerly, hoping to see some sign to indicate that light had at last fallen across the path along which they had once walked together, but trod no longer; but she was simply the well-bred, self-confident woman of the world.

"Has your maid told you—"

He hesitated for a word, and she supplied it:

"All!"

"Well, I think I had better go."

"I do not, and I wish you to remain!"

There was nothing to show why she wished it. Not as much as the quivering of a nerve indicated that she cared for him in the least degree; she might have been a real queen giving business instructions to one of her court.

"I especially desire that there shall be no waste of words over this affair, and I really cannot enter into any argument, but I say to

you in a few plain words: I wish you to remain! Will you do so?"

Allen glanced at Kit.

"Can I see you privately before I decide?"

"Pardon me, but not if you wish to bring up my affairs. Please don't be offended at the remark, for I have already asked you to avoid argument on that subject. As for what Emma has told you, accept it without remark, since it must remain a mystery, but don't leave Summit View. We should all miss you."

It was impossible for him to resist that invitation. He could discern no hope in her voice or manner, but she had asked him to remain with unquestionable sincerity, and he would have been an exceptional lover if he had declined. Remembering that Kit's sharp eyes were regarding him he gravely bowed and replied:

"Your wish is my law."

And then he withdrew from the room. Going to his own quarters, he had just brought order out of confusion again when he chanced to look out of the window and saw Doctor Everton pacing slowly back and forth, his head lowered in deep meditation.

What was to be thought of the man? Was he at the bottom of the crusade against Estelle? Just now it looked as though he was not, for why should the visitor of the previous night have been secretly admitted by Kit Kenney, if Doctor Everton, the instigator of the plot, was already in the house?

"It don't look like Everton, but my opinion has already whiffled around so often in the matter that I will not say decisively. I can't forget the letter I lost in the billiard-room. As for that scene last night, what did Estelle buy of the stranger? In my opinion, there can be but one answer—compromising papers. I certainly hope she has drawn the fangs of the mystery, and that all is well with her again. Be that as it may, I am sure she will, in the end, be relieved of every shadow of blame."

Leaving his room he found Hugh Warburton and communicated the latest phases of the case to him, and, after a careful consideration of everything, Hugh was inclined to take a cheerful view of the situation.

Very likely, he reasoned, Estelle had disposed of the mystery by the payment of the two thousand dollars, and all would soon be well and Allen restored to his old place in her regards.

That afternoon Allen chanced to overhear a conversation through an open window in which the former maid, Emma, reappeared. She was talking with another servant, and their subject was the possible marriage of Miss Wayne and Doctor Everton.

Emma took strong ground against the possibility.

"But you know it was once rumored that they were married," persisted the other servant.

"Yes, when Miss Estelle was a child of fifteen," replied Emma. "That was nonsense."

"People didn't think so then."

"I did, and I do now."

"There is usually some cause for such a rumor."

"There was no cause for that."

"How do you explain it, then?"

"I don't explain it," Emma slowly replied, "for there was something about it which I never understood. Miss Estelle and Doctor Everton did go to the parsonage together—I know that—but not to be married. Why they went I don't know, and all my guessing did no good. Miss Estelle was in some kind of trouble, and a good deal worried; but she seemed perfectly happy after they went to the parsonage. I think the doctor acted as her friend and helped her, and that she was grateful to him, but marry him—nonsense! she never did that!"

Emphatic was the assertion, but Allen heard no more. The women left the room, and he was free to wonder all that he saw fit. Whether Emma's opinion was trustworthy or not could not be told, and it seemed that Estelle had kept her own counsel, even then.

The conversation had again brought up that old mystery, however, and made it seem positive that there was something in it.

Estelle had then appeared to be in mental trouble, and she and Everton had visited the parsonage.

Why had they gone, if not to be married?

Probably no one then near Summit View could explain except one of the two. It was wholly unlikely, considering Estelle's reserved nature, that her father had any clew to the mystery, and it would certainly be useless and cruel to try to draw the secret from him.

Allen was thinking thus when Judge Wayne came out on the piazza arm-in-arm with Mr. Edward Wayne, and followed by Old Doubledark. They did not at once perceive Allen, and the latter sauntered away.

He would have done better, perhaps, to remain.

The mental condition of the old judge was every week becoming more pitiful. Daily occurrences came and went like shadows, though he still recognized every one he knew; but, as a rule, he lived in the past rather than the present. His conversation was always dignified, formal,

and polite, and as long as his mind dwelt upon the events of former years, his speech and manner were still impressive.

Somewhat curiously, Old Doubledark was more of a favorite with him than any of the other guests. He would turn from Marlowe, Warburton, or Everton, or even from Clara and Eddila Raynor, to talk with the detective, and he found pleasure in his company.

He had no rival in this preference; grave, reserved, 'scholarly' Gordon Brentwood was not a favorite with any of the younger people.

This did not trouble Doubledark. The more they noticed him the more danger there would be of arousing their suspicions, and, thus far, he had moved quietly about among them, watching and studying each, without once awakening suspicion that he was a detective.

His silent, waiting game was being well played, and ideas were taking shape in his mind, but he gave no sign. Patient as an Indian, he waited for the hidden foe to show his hand. When he joined the judge on the piazza he was on the brink of one discovery.

CHAPTER XX.

THE JUDGE SPEAKS.

JUDGE WAYNE sat erect and assumed his most impressive air.

"When I was practicing law," he observed, "I had a good many strange cases. People have an idea that there is but little romance in a lawyer's life, and that it is a series of petty tricks and squabbles. Some say we do no actual work ourselves, but have our clerks prepare all our cases; others say that we work like slaves, and never see the least diversion. Well, sir,"—to Doubledark—"I can only speak for myself; but I was a hard worker, and some of my cases were also decidedly romantic."

He then drifted away into a story, and his brother and Doubledark listened politely. When it was done, the old judge continued to talk.

"It comes natural to the Waynes to take to the law," he asserted. "My grandfather was a lawyer; so was my father; and Edward and I have a brother named Nicholas, whose sons are following the same course. There are nine of them—No, not nine, but—"

He became confused, hesitated, and looked appealingly at Edward Wayne.

"Brother Nicholas has five sons, of whom three are lawyers," put in Edward, quietly.

"Just so; just so; it runs in the family, you see. Edward, here, has a son, but he is a doctor. As for me, Estelle is my only child. Well, well, no amount of sons could fill the place in my heart that she fills!"

"You will have a son when she marries," suggested the detective.

The judge frowned slightly.

"I am in no haste to have her marry; I never took kindly to the idea. Fortunately for me, she does not encourage the suitors who approach her. It is absurd to suppose that any woman lacks suitors, and I trust that you will not think me absurd when I say that Estelle has had her share."

"I can well believe that," Doubledark replied.

"As long ago as when she was a child of fifteen," added the judge, "there was actually a rumor that she was married—a most absurd rumor, of course. George Everton was the man mentioned in connection with the affair, and, though he was much older than she, the rumor ran its course briskly. I do not know what started it, however."

"The tongue of Rumor needs but little foundation," responded the detective, but he was less careless than he seemed.

"True; and it was enough, in this case, that Everton and Estelle knew each other. They were good friends, but you will readily see that a girl of fifteen, with Estelle's sensible ideas, would not be foolish enough to marry."

"Did you try to trace the rumor?"

"It arose from a slight circumstance. The minister of the town where we then lived had a nephew who was named Guerdon Frazer. He was a wild young fellow who, being called upon to choose a means of livelihood, adopted the profession of a preacher because he thought it an easy way of getting his living. He was as well fitted for it, with his erratic nature, as a hawk would be for a farm-yard fowl."

"Did he really study?"

"Obl yes; and, at that time, was a full-fledged minister—all but an appointment. That he never received, for his wild ways were known. He finally drifted away and sunk out of sight."

"So his name was connected with the rumor?"

"Yes; it was said that Estelle and Everton went secretly to the parsonage and were married by young Frazer."

"You proved it false, I suppose?"

"I did. I called upon Frazer and questioned him, and he denied the whole thing, point blank. They had called at the parsonage, he explained, frankly, but it was to see some botanical specimens which he had."

"Did you mention it to Everton or Miss Wayne?"

"I questioned Everton, and he gave me his word of honor that there had been no love affair, much less a wedding, and denied all. He corroborated what Guerdon Frazer said about the specimen."

"And Miss Wayne?"

"I told her about the rumor, and how I had proved it false."

"What did she say?"

"She laughed at the idea of her marrying Everton."

Old Doubledark had given Edward Wayne a significant look so that he would not imagine Judge Wayne was being questioned from any idle motive. The detective would have been wronged had any one thought he was leading an infirm old man to unfold his family affairs out of mere curiosity.

The questioner's interest was professional.

What he had before heard of this rumored marriage, had not impressed him as being so very significant, but the judges made the matter plainer, fresher in mind and more official than before.

The secret plot of a secret foe was no longer so much of a mystery to the detective. He believed that, though the identity of the foe was still unknown, he had a clew to the plot.

It menaced Estelle Wayne.

Doubledark's eyes were sharper than those of most of the guests at Summit View, and all of Estelle's great self-control had not served to hide from him the fact that she was in trouble. When he overheard the interview between Marlowe and Nick, he had the clew. Plainly, Estelle had gone to Kenney's house to meet an enemy, and one who held her more or less in his power.

The detective had leaped to the conclusion that she was being blackmailed, and that theory explained, in a measure, the peculiar course of the plotter. There is no more ignoble crime than the blackmailing of a woman, and it is essentially a work which the scoundrel would wish kept secret.

No wonder the evil-doer in this particular case was keeping so quiet.

Having gone as far as this, Doubledark asked himself two more questions. Who was the blackmailer, and what was the secret hold he had upon Estelle?

As he had before suspected Everton, the judge's story was suggestive. If Estelle had had an old love-affair it might furnish material for a conspiracy; at any rate, it was worth looking into further.

But who could be the blackmailer?

Estelle appeared to be on good terms with Everton, and, even if the appearance was only a deception, what motive could he have for making her meet him at Kenney's when one roof already sheltered both?

Doubledark dropped the matter there, but, when the judge went in soon after, questioned Edward Wayne.

"What is there to this matter?"

"Nothing, I really believe."

"You heard the rumor at the time?"

"Yes."

"And believed it unfounded?"

"Certainly."

"Can you add anything to what your brother said?"

"No; I knew far less about it than he did. Besides, he always laughed at it."

"What has become of that young parson?—Mr. Guerdon Frazer."

"I don't know. He was fully as wild as my brother stated—even dissipated—and could get no chance to preach. When he failed utterly he went away. I think he is West."

"Do you think Miss Wayne regards Everton as a friend?"

"Yes."

"Anything more?"

"Oh! no—I hope not."

"You don't like him?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, I am prepared to say one thing. In all probability the secret plot which menaces Summit View is an attempt to blackmail Estelle Wayne!"

"Impossible!"

"Why so?"

"What is there in her life which could be the basis for such a course?"

"That is for us to learn."

"The idea is wild—out of question. Blackmail can only be levied where there is a guilty secret, and Estelle's life has been blameless. You must look further; there can be nothing in her career to lead to blackmail."

A faint, but cynical smile crossed Doubledark's face. He had not been a detective for long years for nothing. He did not trust any one enough to feel sure that he, or she, was worthy of such an assertion. He was willing to regard everybody as blameless as long as he was not required to do otherwise; then no person's rank in life was a shield to suspicion.

"My own opinion of Miss Wayne is favorable," he replied, truthfully, "but misfortune, as well as guilt, sometimes brings a person into the hands of a blackmailer. I wish to know more about that alleged marriage."

"I suppose we might question Estelle—"

"We will defer it a while. Just now I feel like going to the town where Miss Wayne then lived, and making a few cautious inquiries. I shall go to-day. In the meanwhile, I desire you to keep sharp watch, for I tell you positively that your niece is in trouble."

"Great heavens! I can hardly believe it!" almost groaned Wayne. "I would as soon doubt my own honor. Nonsense! The comparison is weak! Estelle is above suspicion, and I know it!"

"Bear in mind that I have said nothing against her, and that my opinion of her is favorable. While you are doing your watching, during my absence, be careful not to alarm Estelle or Marlowe. Give them no ground for suspicion. I think we shall soon have cause to ask Miss Wayne to confide in us, but I suspect that she will refuse us in the same way that Marlowe did. We will see, however."

Some further conversation took place, and then Doubledark left the house and returned to his own cottage.

He left Wayne in a very uneasy state of mind, and the guests at Sunniet View obtained but little pleasure from their host that day. He was not the only one who was out of spirits—Allen Marlowe was as glum and silent as he could well be.

Miss Wayne did not appear until the time of the six o'clock dinner. Then, however, her ease and tranquillity were not to be surpassed, as far as outward show went. Some conversation passed between her and Allen, but not by word or look did she show any recollection of the events of the morning.

Allen felt himself an ill-used man, and even to Hugh he was curt and sulky. Warburton, however, found ready excuse for his mood. Marlowe retired early that night, and was lucky enough to fall asleep quickly; but he had a startling awakening.

At the dead of night, and in utter darkness, he awoke with piercing shrieks ringing in his ears, and as he sprung to his feet the cries continued, with an inflection which filled him with horror. All things went to tell of some person in extreme danger.

"My God!" he gasped, "they come from Estelle's chamber!"

Then out on the air rung three distinct, terrible cries:

"Help! Murder!—murder!"

CHAPTER XXI. THE THIEF AT NIGHT.

IT seemed to Allen Marlowe that his heart ceased beating, and the spell of terror which was upon him was not unlike a nightmare of a particularly hideous kind; but his inactivity was only temporary. The cries which had so startled him certainly proceeded from the vicinity of Estelle's chamber, if not from within it, and the idea that she was in peril stirred him to prompt action.

It was the work of only a moment to fling on his dressing-gown, and he tore open the door and rushed out into the hall with more haste than ceremony.

Utter darkness reigned there, but he heard the sound of a desperate struggle—still from the direction of Estelle's chamber—an imprecation, and then a panting, gurgling sound which might have been that of a person at the last extremity.

Marlowe sprung forward with a loud cry, but, as he did so, another door opened and light fell upon the scene.

It was Doctor Everton who had so opportunely appeared, and, singularly enough, he stood in the door of his room fully dressed, a lamp in his hand.

By the light thus afforded, Allen saw a stout, coarse-featured man and a woman in the hall. The latter was in the grasp of the former, and his hand was at her throat with a purpose not to be misunderstood.

She it was who had cried for help, but Allen experienced great relief when he recognized the girl, Emma—a relief, however, somewhat lessened by the fact that the door of Miss Wayne's room was ajar.

Her door was open, but she was invisible.

Had she been injured?

Had the first cries come from her?

With a hoarse shout Allen sprung toward the big stranger, and he moved none too soon to save Emma. The grasp on her throat was murderous, and the end would soon have come had it not been for the arrival of help.

The man had turned in startled surprise as the light flashed upon the scene, but, before he could do more, a blow from Allen's clinched hand dashed him to the floor.

Emma, released, fell beside him.

The man was up in a twinkling, but Allen's hands were on him, and a skillful twist of his foot tripped the unknown. He fell heavily upon him, and then held him down. The unknown struggled, but another pair of hands came to Allen's aid and Hugh Warburton's voice coolly said:

"No, you don't! Hang fast to him, Allen, and we will have an upheaval here!"

Allen's wandering gaze at this moment detected a box on the floor not far away—plainly

a jewel-box—but as Emma struggled to her feet and the rest of the household came pouring into the hall, there was general excitement.

Marlowe saw but one person, however, and that was Estelle.

She had appeared in the doorway of her room, clad in a wrapper, her long hair floating over her shoulders. Singularly enough, she seemed to be the calmest person there. Perceiving at one swift glance that no one seemed to be injured, she quietly advanced and picked up the jewel-case.

"These are my diamonds," she said, "and he evidently came to steal them."

"You have me to thank that he didn't," cried Emma, glibly enough, but with a thickness of utterance which showed that the choking had not failed to leave its effects behind. "Only for me he would have got away, diamonds and all."

At this moment Judge Wayne came to the front, striking his cane forcibly on the floor.

"What!" he exclaimed, "a thief in our own house? Now, by my life, this is bold! Does the wretch know who I am? Men who do know me, don't care to risk my anger. I'll appear personally against him in court, by Jove!"

And again the cane came down heavily.

"I will see that all is right, brother," soothingly said Mr. Edward Wayne, as he took the judge's arm.

"Ten years—yes, twenty years he shall get!" Estelle's father added. "Not a day less. I'll teach such fellows not to come to a house where I am a guest. I'll personally appear against him in court!"

The old judge was very much excited, and Mr. Wayne finally prevailed upon him to retire to the room, where he soon forgot all that had occurred.

The prisoner had been growling and cursing in his grasp of Allen and Hugh, and they now lifted him unceremoniously to his feet.

"Who knows him?" Hugh asked.

Nobody answered.

"A stranger, eh? So much the better; such an acquaintance is not to be desired. Now, my man, your explanation is in order. Who are you? Make a clean breast of it!"

"I won't!" sullenly replied the prisoner.

"Why not?"

"That's my business."

"We are sure to find out, sooner or later."

"Do so, then!"

"Wait," interrupted Allen, convinced that nothing could be gained by questioning the prisoner at that time. "Let us find out just what has happened. I judge that no one is seriously injured."

"Isn't there?" retorted Emma. "I've been nearly strangled. Is that nothing?"

"Was it you who cried 'Murder'?"

"Yes, and who would do less?"

Emma was indignant at the prospect of a decision that she was not entitled to cry "Murder" whenever she wanted to, and Allen hastened to pacify her and ask for a full explanation.

She gave it.

"I'm a very light sleeper, and I woke up just after midnight and heard a sound I knew ought not to be heard—the southing of the wind in the next room. It made the curtain rattle, and I knew the window was open; though it ought to be closed. I got up and went in to shut it."

"Sure enough, it was open, and as I looked out I saw a ladder leaning against the side of the house. Then I knew there was a murderer or burglar inside. I was terribly scared, and ran back into my room and locked myself in. Then I thought that was not the proper thing to do, and I determined to rouse the gentlemen and let them take care of the man. I came out, but just as I was passing Miss Estelle's door, out came a man from there."

"I knew by his looks that he was nobody that belonged here, if it was dark; and I gave a screech. Then he struck me and tried to run, but I caught hold of him so that he could not get away and screamed all the harder. He just about choked me to death, but I notice that he didn't get away!"

Proudly Emma made this assertion, returning the glare of the prisoner with a defiant look.

"A clear case of robbery," said Allen, glancing at the jewel-case.

"And a clear case for Sing Sing," Hugh added.

"We will deliver him to the authorities early in the morning," said Mr. Edward Wayne.

Estelle moved to his side.

"Uncle?"

"Yes, my dear?"

"I have a request to make."

"Consider it granted."

"Thank you. Please release the prisoner!"

"Eh?"

"Release the prisoner!"

Mr. Wayne suddenly laughed.

"Oh! I see; this is your joke. Well, we—"

"I am in earnest," Miss Wayne steadily replied, disregarding the many wondering looks centered on her face. "I certainly would not jest on such an occasion. This man tried to rob

me, and has molested no other property. I feel that I am entitled to a voice in the case, and my wish is that he may go at once, never to return."

"But, my dear child," cried Mr. Wayne, in amazement, "it is impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"Who ever heard of such a thing before?"

"The past has nothing to do with this case. I am the one upon whom robbery has been attempted, and I say that he must go free!"

Her voice had grown firm, almost imperative, and every one looked at her in astonishment. The idea of releasing the man who had tried to steal valuable jewels was certainly a surprising one to originate in her calm, logical, judicial mind.

"Am I not right, Doctor Everton?" she asked turning to that gentleman.

He flushed a little, and his eyes dropped.

"Yes," he promptly added.

"And you, Mr. Marlowe?"

"I cannot agree with you, Miss Wayne," was the grave reply.

"Certainly not," Hugh added; "this fellow has the face of a thorough scoundrel, and this crime should not be overlooked."

"It will be overlooked," imperiously retorted Miss Wayne. "I have a right to my will in this case, and whoever opposes me, makes me his enemy. Now, who will say that the prisoner shall not go?"

No one answered at first; then Mr. Wayne requested a few words in private with his niece. They went, and were gone nearly half an hour. When they returned Mr. Wayne's face was grave, and it was plain that he had yielded to an unpleasant necessity.

Estelle had proved immovable, and he knew better than to oppose the will she inherited from the old judge.

"Mr. Marlowe, will you kindly escort this man to the door, and then let him go free?" asked Mr. Wayne, with a motion toward the prisoner.

"Mr. Marlowe and Doctor Everton," amended Estelle.

Allen glanced quickly at the last speaker. He comprehended her motive. Everton was to be a check upon him, to keep him from questioning the thief. Allen bit his lips, angrily, for he had entertained no thought of questioning the man, but nodded in cold silence and the three went their way.

Marlowe opened the outer door and tersely said:

"Go!"

"Not without a word o' thanks," the thief replied. "I know gents an' ladies when I see 'em, an' this house is white, it is. I've been treated square, an' I'm sorry I come in an' woke ye all up so untimely; I really be: an' I hope you will sleep well the rest o' the night."

"You were told to go," said Everton, sharply.

"I was, but my conscience won't let me, without I make what amends I can for disturbin' of ye. You see, I was led into this by—"

Doctor Everton seized him fiercely by the arm.

"Will you go, or shall I throw you out?" he hotly cried, a peculiar, and, Allen thought, startled look on his face.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SUDDEN FLITTING.

THE thief shrugged his broad shoulders coolly. "I don't think ye will throw me out, Doctor Everton," he replied, steadily. "If you should try it, I'd break you in two like I would a dry twig!"

"Perhaps you are anxious to be arrested, after all," Allen suggested, but not in a very belligerent voice.

"Not much, I ain't, but I have a word to say before I go. It'll pay you to hear it. I was hired to do this job, an' I want ye to know it. If I ain't all at sea with my reckonin', him that hired me ain't no common thief, either; he struck me as bein' a fine gentleman, though he was so disguised that Old Nick couldn't have told who he were. He got me up here all the way from New York, just to do the job; said he wanted to keep invisible, himself. I advise you folks, pertic'larly the young lady with the diamonds, to look out for him. He knew the inside o' this house like a book, an' must have been here himself some time. Look out for him! That's all; accept my thanks an' good wishes, an' good-night!"

A short nod followed the last words, and then the thief turned and strode away.

Allen looked after him regretfully.

Had the man told all, or would closer questioning have developed more?

The check Estelle had shrewdly put upon him stood beside him in the shape of Doctor Everton. He turned and looked sharply, suspiciously at his companion.

How did it happen that the doctor had appeared in the hall fully dressed when Emma's cries alarmed the house? Why, too, had the doctor been so anxious to hurry the thief away, when it was plain to Allen, at least, that the thief had a statement to make?

Everton turned and met his gaze.

"What do you think of it?" Allen asked.

"All moonshine."

"It impressed me as being true."

"Nonsense! It was only some yarn conceived under the spur of the moment, and not worth consideration. Let me return to the others at once."

The doctor spoke with some show of carelessness, but his heavy brows looked unusually dark and scowling. He turned away as he spoke, and stood ready to lock the door. Allen came in, the bolt clicked, and then they rejoined the party in the hall.

Mr. Edward Wayne had a private safe, and in this the ladies' jewels were placed for safe-keeping. Allen thought that Estelle perversely hesitated about parting thus with hers, and she glanced at Kit Kenney and, he thought, received a significant look in return, but the jewels were finally handed over without argument.

Then the house was secured, and every one retired except one man-servant.

He watched during the remainder of the night.

Allen Marlowe had new food for thought after he had gone to his room. If the thief was to be believed—and Allen did believe him—the events of the night were all due to the agency of the "invisible" man.

Moreover, the thief had advanced the idea that his employer had been inside Summit View, and was certainly well acquainted with the house. Take this in connection with the fact that Doctor Everton, an inmate of the mansion, had promptly appeared, fully dressed; that he had seconded Miss Wayne's advice to let the man go, and, when the thief seemed liable to confess something, had threatened to throw him from the house if he did not go—consider all this, and what was to be thought of Everton?

"I have been a fool to ever entertain a doubt," Allen thought. "Everton is, of course, the 'invisible' man, and he who is darkening Estelle's life!"

Having decisively settled this point Allen felt relieved, and he fell asleep and did not awake again until morning.

The morning brought no new surprise or alarm, but it was noticeable that very little was said at the table about the adventure.

Mr. Wayne's manner indicated deep regret that the thief had been allowed to go; Allen and Hugh were silent for Estelle's sake; Everton was taciturn; Judge Wayne had forgotten the whole affair; and the ladies, somehow, were silent and abstracted.

All save Estelle. She was her usual calm, gracious, noble self, and her careful, yet unostentatious, care of her aged father was as striking as usual.

After breakfast Doctor Everton suggested to Allen and Hugh that the three take a stroll up the bank of the river; a proposal which somewhat surprised them, but which was not declined.

They left, and two hours were thus consumed. At the end of that time Allen found that he had become separated from the others; probably by moving too slowly; and as he was not disposed to hurry and catch up with them, he turned back and was soon near Summit View again.

He found one of the servants near the river.

"You were not here to bid Miss Estelle good-by, sir," the man observed.

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you know she was going to New York, sir?"

"To New York? Certainly not. Do you mean to say that she really has gone?"

"Yes, sir; she and that new maid of hers—the Gypsy Kenney—have just gone by the Central. Train left the depot ten minutes or so ago. I heard one of the women ask her when she would return, and she answered, 'In a week, more or less.' I thought at the time it was a sudden start. Emma has been taken back into service, and will care for Judge Wayne while they're gone. I half suspect, Mr. Marlowe, that Miss Estelle has repented of letting that thief go, and has gone to New York to lodge information against him."

The servant seemed capable of talking forever, but was given no chance.

Allen had listened and thought at the same time, and had come to a conclusion.

"People will take sudden resolutions," he carelessly observed. "I've taken one myself. I have been intending to go to Albany for some days, and I am now off. Please convey my apologies to—Ahi! here is Mr. Edward Wayne, now. I will explain to him."

He explained, but did not state that, acting on a sudden thought, he was going to follow Estelle and her maid to New York. On the contrary, he said that he had decided to make a long-contemplated run up to Albany, but would return in a day or two.

Mr. Wayne seemed somewhat surprised by the abrupt start, following as it did on top of "Estelle's freak," as he expressed it; but Allen smoothed the matter over as much as possible, simulating a carelessness he was far from feeling and finally got away and crossed the river to the station on the Central.

The first thing he did was to send a telegram

in cipher to New York. It was to a personal friend and, he knew, would get there in advance of the train which carried Estelle.

His next step was to buy a ticket to Albany; a step which he took to throw possible inquirers off the track.

When the up-train passed he made it a point to disappear from the depot; when the down-train arrived he secretly boarded it, and was soon whirling away toward the metropolis.

Once on the way he had a chance to think calmly on the step so hurriedly taken. He was obliged to confess that he might possibly have been unduly precipitate.

When he heard that Estelle had started for New York he decided that important events would follow her arrival there. Whether the journey had any connection with the thief he was not prepared to say, but he did believe that it had connection with the mystery, and that she had gone to meet the "invisible" man or one of his agents.

Hence, his own journey.

He had telegraphed to a friend, directing him to meet the train which bore Estelle and Kit Kenney, giving description of each and requesting the friend not to lose sight of them until his own arrival—all this in cipher.

Contrary to his expectations, his friend was awaiting his arrival at the depot.

"Well, what success?" Allen eagerly asked.

"None too good."

"Have you seen them?"

"I've seen the maid, but not the mistress."

"Indeed! How is that?"

"Don't know, I'm sure; couldn't get sight of anybody but the Italian-looking girl and the man."

"The man?"

"Yes."

"What man?"

"The one who was with her. Didn't you expect it? True, you did not mention him, but I thought—"

"Please explain just what you have seen," Allen impatiently interrupted.

"Easily done. On receipt of your telegram I came here and waited for the train. It came; I looked for the parties described. Saw the dark-faced maid and recognized her at once. No sign of the mistress. Man with the maid? I looked long and anxiously for the mistress but could not discover her, and as I saw that I must either give her up or lose the maid, I decided to make sure of what I had, at all hazards. I followed the maid. She and the same man were just entering a cab. I engaged a second cab and followed.

"We were led from Forty-second street to Fourteenth, where the foremost carriage halted, the two persons got out and entered a store.

"I was foolish enough to wait in my cab for them. Five minutes passed—ten—twenty. I became uneasy and entered the store myself. They were not there, and the clerk said they had made a trifling purchase and at once gone out by another door.

"I went back to their cabman. He had been asked to wait for them, and when he heard of their disappearance he swore loudly. I swore silently. I comprehended that I had been outwitted. Seeing that they were pursued, or believing they would be, they had played a simple trick and evaded me."

"And you have not seen them since?"

"No."

"Nor the lady whom you did not see at first at the station?"

"Nor yet her."

"Where in the world did she go?"

Allen's friend shook his head.

"Now you have me."

"What kind of man was with the maid?"

"Very respectable-looking fellow of middle age."

Allen stood in utter silence. He was thrown off the track, and to regain it in New York would be one chance in a thousand. Of course he could not employ a detective; it was bad enough for him to act the spy alone; and his own efforts would probably be thrown away if he made further search.

He would not—could not—give up, however; and then began a search which was as irregular as it was persistent. He did not know where Estelle would be likely to stop, but he kept sharp watch of the registers of certain hotels, and frequented Broadway, Madison and Union Squares, and the various theaters, always watching for Estelle.

Nothing came of it.

He began to think of returning to Summit View, but hesitated to do so, feeling guilty enough to believe that every one would understand why he had gone away and what he had been about. True, he had sent a letter to Albany with instructions to have it mailed back to Summit View to Hugh Warburton, and had written Hugh to "accidentally" drop the envelope in a conspicuous place, but he had little faith in the device.

On the second day of his stay he stood on the Elevated Railroad platform of the Sixth avenue line, waiting at Fourteenth street for a down-train.

The up-train arrived first and paused at the

station. He looked absently across. The cars of the train were sparsely filled, and at one window he noticed a dark, Gypsyish girl who, with lowered head, was mechanically examining a jewel-case.

Allen started as though shot.

He recognized the jewel-case as Estelle Wayne's, and the Gypsyish girl was Kit Kenney!

CHAPTER XXIII.

ANOTHER SURPRISE.

ALMOST at the same moment that Allen made this discovery the train started, and all he had was a vanishing view of the dusky face as it glided away.

He would have dashed across the track and tried to seize the last car, but, just at that instant, along came the down-train and his way was shut off. When it was gone he crossed the rails in defiance of the dark looks of the employees. The train that held Kit Kenney was rolling away toward Twenty-third street.

He looked for the next one.

It was slowly creeping away from the Eighth street station. When it arrived he hurried in, and then the helplessness of his situation occurred to him. He was in pursuit, but how was he to know where to leave the train? Kit might be going to any of the numerous stations along the line.

He decided that his only chance was to go to Forty-second street, on the blind hope that Kit might be homeward bound.

Acting on this idea he soon stood on the sidewalk at that point. Kit was not in sight. He looked east, then west, then back again, in utter perplexity. If homeward bound, would she use the Central, as when she came down, or the West Shore, and avoid the ferry at Summit View?

The question was still unsolved in his mind when he saw a man spring from a rapidly-moving surface car and rush up to him. It was his friend who had tried to follow Kit on her arrival in New York.

"Just the man I was looking for," said his friend. "I've got a telegram for you!"

"A telegram? Give it to me at once."

It was in care of his friend, and, through this chance meeting, had reached him without delay. He broke the seal. The message was in cipher, but he read it at a glance.

"Miss Wayne is at home. Do not think she has been away at all."

"HUGH WARBURTON."

Allen was dumfounded. Nothing at that moment could have surprised him more; unless the message was forged, the facts were astonishing. Plainly, too, it was not forged; the cipher settled that momentary doubt.

Then a theory flashed upon Marlowe.

"I have been duped, and sent down here merely to get me out of the way. Do you know when I can get a train north?"

"If you are in haste, I think you can just about catch one on the West Shore."

"I am in haste, and will catch it if possible."

He wrung his friend's hand, caught a street car and was soon on his way to Weehawken Ferry. Before he reached there he had more time for reflection, but that only served to make the case more obscure. If Estelle had all the time been at Summit View, what was Kit Kenney doing in New York with her mistress's jewel-case in her possession?

Had she stolen it and fled?

This would have been a reasonable surmise, but in the face of it was Mr. Wayne's statement, corroborated by that of the servant, that Estelle and the Kenney girl had gone to New York together; and whether or not they had made that journey in company, they had certainly left Summit View together in the Wayne carriage.

"It is only more of that villainous, impenetrable mystery," thought Allen, almost with a groan. "I cannot see an inch into it, and I will not try. But, wait! Hugh must be mistaken; it cannot be that Estelle is at Summit View. If she was, Kit would not be in New York. And the man who arrived at the depot with Kit—what of him? Who is he? What is he doing? Ugh! I won't try to understand!"

This resolution was more easily made than kept, and he moved like one in a dream until he found himself in a car of the West Shore line and whirling away northward.

He had purchased an alleged humorous book with which he tried to interest himself, but the attempt was a failure, and he laid it down and glanced carelessly at his fellow-passengers.

Suddenly he started, and the careless look entirely disappeared from his face.

Kit Kenney was there!

Yes; half a dozen seats away the daughter of the barbarians sat quietly on the opposite side of the car, looking out of the window at the fleeting landscape.

Allen was astonished, but a little thought showed him that all this was the most simple thing in the case. Kit had been on her way to take the train when he saw her at Fourteenth street, and he had merely followed in her steps by chance.

Like himself, she was returning to Summit View.

Allen looked through the whole car, hoping to discover Estelle, but she was not there.

Kit had a companion at her elbow in the person of a man who occupied the other half of the seat, and as Allen looked at him, he positively decided that it was the same man who had been with the girl when they arrived in New York, and so cleverly evaded their pursuer.

Marlowe gazed at him sharply. Who was he? Clearly, not one of the Kenney barbarians, for he was a more refined and respectable-looking man. His appearance, too, was that of one who lives in a city.

The journey need not be dwelt upon. Whatever the connection between Kit and the man, they were not a sociable couple. Now and then she spoke to him, but his answers were brief, and he seemed to wish to avoid conversation. Once or twice his curtness made Kit toss her head in the old way, after which she would again turn and look out of the window.

Neither she nor the man looked around at any time, and Allen believed her unconscious of his presence.

In due time the station near Summit View was reached.

When the train stopped Kit arose and left the car, but the man kept his place. She gave him a short nod, which he returned, and then went out.

Was he only a chance traveling companion, after all?

This question was promptly answered, for the stranger put his head partly out of the window, and spoke three words:

"She is coming!"

His voice was low, and had Allen not been exactly beside him he would not have distinguished what was said.

The young man flashed a quick glance outside to see who was addressed.

There stood the Wayne coachman, who suddenly nodded, and then went forward to the step of the car. Allen hastened through the car to see what became of the barbarian.

When he reached the platform Kit and the coachman were moving toward the Wayne carriage. The door opened, Kit entered, the coachman mounted the box, and the vehicle rolled away toward Summit View.

A hand touched Allen's arm, and he turned and saw Hugh Warburton. The latter smiled, and observed:

"You are back promptly."

"Yes, I received your telegram. Are you sure—"

"Wait a moment. Let us get away from the station before we talk. If we climb the bluff we may reach the house as soon as the carriage, and I would like to see it arrive. I suppose Kit will be smuggled in at a side-door."

They were now well away from the depot, walking briskly, and Allen finished his interrupted sentence.

"Are you sure Estelle is at Summit View?"

"I am. I have twice seen her with my own eyes."

"How in the world is that? Why did she announce that she was going to New York, and then—"

"Ah, you don't understand. She has not been visible at Summit View, in the strict meaning of the words. She has lived a hermit-life, keeping in her father's rooms. I believe Edward Wayne thinks she went to New York; only the maid, Emma, is in the secret. I say 'only Emma,' for the poor old judge is incapable of betraying her secret. He don't know one hour what happened the hour before. Anyway, Miss Wayne has not been away."

"But Kit has—I saw her in New York—and she had Estelle's diamonds."

"Estelle's diamonds!" cried Warburton. "Impossible, my dear fellow. Who would trust the barbarian with jewels to that amount?"

"Well, I won't say that she had the diamonds, for I did not see them, but she *did* have the jewel-case. If you took notice of the case the night that the thief tried to steal it, you must remember that it is ornamented on the outside in a peculiar and elaborate way. I will swear that Kit had the case, whether the diamonds were there or not."

"This is most singular," said Hugh, in perplexity. "Can it be that Kit stole some of the jewels? But, no; if she had done that, she would never have returned here."

"Well, here we are at Wayne's, and further explanations must be reserved until we can talk in private. As you said, Kit will probably be left at some obscure point from which she can creep in unseen."

By taking the direct way up the bluff the young men had reached the grounds ahead of the carriage, which was compelled to follow the circuitous road. They now drew to one side and, from cover, watched the course of the carriage.

It did not pause at the outskirts of the grounds, nor yet go to a side-entrance, but, keeping in the broad drive-way, rolled up to the main entrance with all the dignity of a fine equipage managed by an expert driver.

"This is singular!" muttered Marlowe.

The driver sprung to the ground and opened the carriage door, and then—marvel upon mar-

vels!—Estelle Wayne stepped out, clad in traveling garments and as radiant as the queen of night!

Allen's hand grasped Hugh's arm.

"In the name of all that is mysterious, what does this mean?" he demanded.

But Hugh was staring with a blank face, and only one word escaped his lips:

"Incomprehensible!" he muttered.

Miss Wayne was ascending the steps which led to the door, and Allen suddenly left cover and strode that way without any very clear idea why he was going.

Kit Kenney had followed her mistress from the carriage, but Allen had eyes only for Estelle. The door suddenly opened and Eddila and Clara came out, and both rushed to the arms of their friend, upon whom they lavished kisses as girls will under such circumstances.

"Oh! we are so glad to see you back!" cried Clara. "Did you have a nice time in New York?"

"Of course; I always do," Miss Wayne serenely replied.

All this and more, while Allen stood grimly by, hat in hand, waiting to be recognized or overlooked, as they saw fit.

Estelle was the first to see him, and she released herself from the other ladies and advanced toward her grim-faced lover.

And in her ears blazed and sparkled her diamonds!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SERVANT'S NOTE OF ALARM.

NOTHING could surpass Miss Wayne's graceful self-possession, and her face was happier and lighter of expression, than Allen had seen it for many a day, as she gave him her hand.

"I am glad to see you again, Mr. Marlowe, and trust that you are well," she remarked. "I hear that you, too, have been away. Did you enjoy yourself at Albany?"

If there was a sting behind her words, her manner did not reveal the fact; and he grew courageous from the very audacity of her deceit, and replied:

"Quite well, thank you; but Albany is such a small place in comparison with New York, that my own experience must sink into nothing beside yours. I hope you enjoyed your own visit."

"Did you go to the theaters, Estelle?" cried Clara.

"Or to Central Park?" added Eddila.

"All this in due time," replied Miss Wayne, with gracious kindness. "Here is Mr. Warburton waiting to greet me, and then let me get to my room and lay aside my traveling suit."

She gave her hand to Hugh, appropriate words were said, and then she vanished into the house, the brightest of all the beauties of Summit View, her diamonds sending out little shoots and quivers of light as she passed.

Eddila and Clara followed, and then went Kit, the barbarian. She looked at the young men with what seemed a mixture of curiosity and triumph, grimaced, unseen by them, and went her way.

Allen turned to Hugh in bewilderment.

"I am dumfounded!" he muttered, hoarsely.

"Step a little to one side," Hugh directed.

They went to the further end of the piazza, when Marlowe spoke in his former tone.

"What—what do you make of this?" he asked.

"Ask me to read the Sphinx," was the almost despairing reply, "and when I have solved that riddle, I will take up this! It is too deep for me to grasp, and Estelle grows more and more perplexing. The time has come, however, for us to bend every energy to the work."

"And he defeated, as usual."

"I hope not. This matter is wearing upon me, for you asked me to come here and help you. I have been able to do nothing, and if this continues, I shall give up in despair and leave Summit View."

"No, no; that must not be. If you go, I shall go, too. You are my only friend here, and nothing but your sympathy has kept me up. If you abandon me, hope goes also!"

"Hope shall not go!" Warburton declared. "Why should it? Estelle looked and spoke kindly to you, as though she still regarded you highly, and she is a woman too noble to trifle with affection like yours."

"Circumstances do not favor that view."

"Never give up hope; that's a good motto for you. But to business! First, tell me of your visit to New York. I am full of curiosity and wonder."

Allen obeyed, giving the story in plain, strong terms, and dwelling on the fact that he had seen Kit, and recognized her, and Miss Wayne's jewel-case at Fourteenth street, as the girl sat in the Elevated Railroad car.

Hugh then made his own statement.

"I was very much surprised when, on returning from the walk with Everton, I was informed by Mr. Wayne that you had gone to Albany, but I at once suspected that there was more in it than appeared on the surface. I waited patiently for the next act in the drama."

"One moment! Did you get the letter I sent to Albany, to be mailed back to you?"

"Yes."

"Did you 'accidentally' drop the envelope?"

"I did, and in a conspicuous place, as you directed. It was found, and it produced the desired effect. I was asked if it was from you; I answered that it was; and the Misses Raynor pretended to be highly offended that you should run away and leave us. No one suspected any deception, and when I telegraphed you in New York, in care of our friend, I used what precautions I could to prevent any one knowing of it."

"You acted wisely, for which I thank you very much. I received the telegram in the nick of time, though to my great wonder, considering its contents. Now, go on with your account."

"Something soon struck me as suspicious. Judge Wayne was reported slightly ill, and he kept his room. Now, if you have observed him to any purpose, you must know that his bodily health is always about the same—he is always feeble, but never sick."

"Despite this, he looks to Estelle to tell him whether he is well or ill. At a hint from her he will keep his room and say he is ill, but at a second hint he comes out and declares that he is in excellent health. Were you or I at any time to suggest that he is not well he would resent it strongly; he would resent it from any one except his daughter. She, however, remarkable woman that she is, has a wonderful hold upon him, and by her womanly tact manages him as one would a docile child."

"My first suspicion was aroused by the fact that Miss Wayne had gone away when her father was ill, leaving him to be cared for by Emma. This was wholly unlike Miss Wayne, especially as her visit to New York was said to be one of pleasure."

"I determined to act the spy. It was a task I loathed, but you called me to Summit View to help you, and I resolved not to be backward about doing so. I became a spy, with the resolution to get a view of Judge Wayne's rooms."

"Yesterday the chance was given me. I saw Emma come out and leave the door ajar. I looked in. Allen, I am ready to solemnly swear that I saw Estelle Wayne there, standing by the old judge, and tenderly smoothing his thin, white hair; and I also assert that he looked to be in his usual health."

"And you say that you saw her again?" broke in Allen, impatiently.

"I saw her cross the upper hall this morning, and go to the judge's room."

"And all this while it was said that she was away?—that she was in New York?"

"Yes, and you saw that the Misses Raynor believed it, by the way they welcomed her back. Of course Edward Wayne and his wife were similarly deceived, and the judge will not betray her, on purpose or by accident, because of his weakness of mind. Each hour is a blank to him as soon as it is gone."

"True; and if he should chance to observe that she was with him, it will be regarded as an aberration of his, and no one will make comment."

"Exactly. By the way, I will wager something that the judge suddenly recovers his health to-day—not because he is in the plot, but because Estelle will convince him he is well."

"Very likely."

"Another thing: The girl, Emma, has been Judge Wayne's supposed attendant since Tuesday, even as she and Estelle have been his *actual* attendants. How do you account for that?"

"We can question Emma—"

Hugh interrupted his friend's eager speech.

"We shall question in vain. Depend upon it, Emma is lost to us. A few days ago she was very bitter against Miss Wayne; now, I venture to say, no power could draw a treacherous word from her. Why? Simply because she has been taken back into service and bound to her mistress by the ties of affection. Estelle knows so well how to create. We have lost Emma, and lost her forever."

"Another blow!"

Allen spoke hopelessly, but Hugh had recovered all of his courage, and he answered steadily:

"We are not beaten yet. We have no cause to boast, considering our own lack of success, I will admit, but we ought to be a match for Miss Wayne's confidential friends."

"She chooses wisely!" Allen exclaimed bitterly. "Think of that Kit Kenney being sent to New York with the diamonds. Perhaps I should say, with the jewel-case, for we are all at sea as to the diamonds."

"Are you sure as to the jewel-case? May it not have been a different one? Miss Wayne has other jewels."

"I can swear that the case was that in which she keeps the diamonds. Yes, and the diamonds were in it; I feel sure of that. Miss Wayne received them back when she met Kit at the depot."

"I am about to surprise you, Allen. The diamonds have not left Estelle's possession."

"No?"

"They have not."

"How do you know?"

"She wore them Tuesday morning; she wore them when she made her fictitious return just now; and when I saw her in her father's rooms, while you were away and she was supposed to be, she wore the self-same diamonds!"

"Are you sure?"

"I am."

"Then, in Heaven's name! why did Kit Kennedy take the jewel-case to New York?"

Hugh's face grew graver, and he shook his head.

"Now you have me—I can't tell!" he confessed reluctantly. "However, be not discouraged; we are not beaten yet. The mystery must and shall be explained."

His voice had grown strong and emphatic, and Allen impulsively reached out and grasped his hand.

"Your courage gives me new hope. Believe me, Hugh, I am conscious of all the good you seek to do me."

"Don't mention it, Al. You've done me favors before now, and I am only repaying you in your own coin. I expect to be best man at your wedding with Miss Wayne, anon; so, you see, it is all selfishness on my part."

At that moment a servant appeared and announced that Mr. Edward Wayne would like to see Allen in the library, to finish a conversation they had before had relative to the purchase of some books, and the young men decided to postpone further discussion for awhile. Hugh wandered away toward the river, and Allen went into the house.

The books mentioned were some of which Allen had told his host, and the latter wished to get the full names and send for them by the next mail. Marlowe's part of the work was soon done, after which he went to his room for a change of apparel and then joined the family below.

He watched for Hugh, but the latter did not come, and an hour passed. The various persons in the room were talking lightly, and all, apparently, in a happy frame of mind, when an outdoor servant suddenly appeared.

His face bore a frightened look, and he spoke abruptly:

"Excuse me for interrupting," he said, breathlessly, "but Mr. Warburton has fallen from the cliff and been killed—unless it's murder!"

CHAPTER XXV.

WAS IT ACCIDENT OR CRIME?

WHEN this startling announcement was flung upon the company without any preparation whatever, there was a brief, dismayed silence. Every one seemed turned to stone, and Clara and Eddila grew perceptibly pale, but the spell was broken by the sudden, violent advance of Allen Marlowe.

"What's that you say?" he demanded, sharply.

"We've found Mr. Warburton at the foot of the cliff, sir, and it seems that he may have fallen and hurt himself, though it may be worse," the servant explained.

"Do you say he is dead?" asked Everton.

"We are afraid he is, sir."

"Lead me to the place!" peremptorily directed the doctor.

"The men are bringing him in now—yes, sir, they are here already."

There was a confused noise in the hall.

"Ladies," added Everton, "you will please stay here."

"We may be of service elsewhere," answered Miss Wayne, quickly.

"If you can be, you shall be notified, but spare yourselves until you know you are needed. Come, Marlowe!"

Allen started. If he had relapsed into silence it was not because he had grown indifferent. His mind was in a whirl, but through it all ran one idea—there had been foul play, and Hugh had fallen victim to the evil fate that menaced them all. At that moment the young man would almost have sworn that the invisible blackmailer had killed Hugh to prevent the latter from working against him.

The necessity of action became apparent at once, and Allen followed the doctor from the room. To the paralyzing horror of the first few moments had succeeded an overpowering desire for revenge, but gentler feelings prevailed when he caught sight of Hugh's pallid face.

It was a mournful sight, and Allen felt that the last hope of solving the great mystery had vanished with the loss of Hugh's aid.

Doctor Everton now exhibited cool, practical common-sense. He moved to Hugh's side as the men upheld him and laid his finger on the dangling wrist.

"He is not dead!" was the prompt announcement. "Cheer up, Marlowe; this may not be anything serious. Carry him to his room, men!"

Edward Wayne appeared just then and seconded the order, and Hugh was borne away. Estelle had not obeyed the direction to remain in her room. She had real friendship for Hugh, and sympathy for all, and once more she offered her aid. Again Everton bade her wait, but he

accompanied the direction with a reference to her kindness which showed him self-possessed enough to be the leading spirit at this time.

His knowledge of medicine and surgery was more than superficial, and when the injured man had been laid upon the bed, he made a skillful examination.

"Warburton is not dead, or likely to die," he said, to Allen, who, lacking medical knowledge, could only hover over his friend helplessly. "I do not count him injured dangerously, though I will stake nothing on the final result. He is stunned—whether it will prove worse I can't say yet."

He ran his hand over Hugh's head with an air which suggested graver fears than he had admitted.

There was soon work for Allen to do, and he rallied and did his part well. Hugh was undressed, and then Everton looked to his injury critically. The only perceptible mark was on his head, and that did not show to any great extent outwardly, but when their efforts failed to bring back consciousness, the doctor was obliged to confess that the case was serious.

There had been more or less shock to the brain, and, at the very least, the patient was destined to pass some time in bed.

Everton had done remarkably good work, but it was he who suggested that a more experienced doctor be called in. Nothing must be left undone, he declared, and as all were of his mind, a servant was sent away for the best surgeon in the vicinity.

Allen had not forgotten the peculiar words of the first servant on the scene, and when he had done all he could for his friend, he sought the man.

"What did you mean," he abruptly asked, "by saying that Mr. Warburton had fallen from the cliff or been murdered?"

"Well, sir, we didn't know which it was."

"How could you be in doubt?"

"We found him at the foot of the bluff, near the river, and as it is a regular cliff there, it occurred to us that if he had fallen from the top it would have bruised him far more."

"Then there was no evidence that he did fall from the cliff?"

"No, sir."

"But he lay near its foot?"

"Yes, sir."

"What reason had you for thinking it could be murder?"

"Somebody suggested that his wound, being so slight to look at, was more such a one as would be made by a blow than a fall."

"You saw no one around there?"

"Nobody at all, sir."

"Warburton may have fallen from a point half-way up the cliff, eh?"

"Yes; I suppose so."

"Why do you hesitate?"

"It don't seem likely, sir. Nobody could climb down the cliff from the top; and nobody could go entirely up from the bottom, for the last twelve feet are too smooth to be scaled."

Marlowe did not reply.

"There wasn't so much as a flower growing on the face of the cliff," added the servant, "so why should he wish to climb it?"

"He did not climb it!"

"No!"

"Your darkest theory was correct," added Allen, fiercely; "Hugh is the victim of an assassin!"

The servant held up his hands in horror.

"Great Heaven! who did it?" he demanded.

"That I don't know; it is for us to find out. Look you, Caleb, you are not to say a word of my suspicions. Give your own theory, if you wish—No; say to every one that you think he fell, and that I say so, too."

Marlowe was recovering prudence.

"I will, sir."

"And now, guide me to where you found him."

The servant promptly obeyed, and Allen was soon on the spot. Just there the bluff took a form not inappropriately called by the men a cliff. It was fifty feet high, and decidedly steep. What had been said about the difficulty of scaling it was quite correct. Between the foot of the cliff and the river was a level, sandy area thirty yards wide. This, Marlowe noticed, was nearly free from stones.

As he looked around he was more than ever impressed with the idea that there had been foul play. He felt sure Hugh's accident had not been the result of a fall. Even if the latter theory had been entertained, what answer could be made to the question—Why had Hugh tried to climb the cliff?

Boys often experiment in that way; men, but seldom.

Allen was not able to decide whether there had been any struggle on the sand. After one of the servants had happened along and found Hugh lying senseless, he had called his associates and they had come in a body. Not having acted systematically, they had trodden the ground up so much before and during the time when they lifted the injured man that whatever tale the sand might have told was forever blotted out.

While Allen still stood there he heard other

voices and, looking around, saw Edward Wayne and Gordon Brentwood advancing.

During the past few days Old Doubledark had not been seen around Summit View. He had appeared again at a most interesting state of affairs, and his face was the only one which bore no shadow of gloom.

Wayne spoke quickly:

"Is there anything new, Marlowe?"

"Nothing whatever."

"It's a wonder Warburton is alive, after a fall over that cliff!"

"He did not fall over!"

"No?"

"He is the victim of a murderous assault!"

"How do you know?"

Allen looked at Brentwood in annoyance. He had cautioned the servant not to spread his opinion, yet here he was telling it again. He was willing Wayne should know his opinion, but not their cold, cynical neighbor.

"I infer it," he answered, after a pause.

"Had Warburton an enemy?" Doubledark inquired.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then who should do him harm?" asked Wayne.

"There are tramps around here," added Doubledark.

"True, very true!" declared Allen, catching at the idea.

"Doctor Everton says the damage was done by a fall," observed Wayne.

"I wouldn't give much for his opinion!" cried Allen, hotly.

"I quite agree with Mr. Marlowe that there may have been foul play," gravely remarked Doubledark.

Allen looked at him with growing friendliness.

"That is the only reasonable supposition," he agreed.

"If Mr. Warburton was dead," pursued Brentwood, "I should be in favor of taking prompt measures to find any man who might have done him harm. As he will probably recover consciousness soon, we can afford to wait for him to enlighten us."

"I think he will say he fell," Wayne persisted.

"I doubt it."

"Everton seems to have no doubt."

Doubledark glanced toward the servant, lowered his voice and asked:

"Can the doctor have any reason for giving an opinion contrary to what he believes?"

"He might, if he was the guilty person!" Allen exclaimed.

"Why should he harm Mr. Warburton?"

The question was very calm, but it recalled to Allen the fact that if he made any half-way confidences, he must have time to frame his words strategically.

"Bear in mind that Doctor Everton was with us at the time of the accident, or crime," urged Wayne.

"So far as that goes," Doubledark answered, "there are such things as instigators and accomplices. However, let us not wrong a man against whom we know nothing. We will not suspect Everton, but let Warburton tell his own story."

CHAPTER XXIV.

OLD DOUBLEDARK AT THE HELM.

DOUBLE DARK had been reading Allen carefully, and he saw that no confession was to be expected from him then. That the young man knew something against Everton, or suspected him, was plain. The detective had won his good will by taking his side in the argument, and felt that an understanding was not far away.

He had not been idle during his absence from the vicinity, and he had something of importance to say to Allen, but the accident to Hugh disarranged his plans. Knowing Allen's friendship for the injured man, he felt that it was better to wait until the latter was in an improved condition.

Hence, his latest advice.

The party returned to the house and received a report that Hugh's condition was unchanged. Everton expressed the opinion that he would not recover consciousness right away, but, on the contrary, he was afraid that brain fever might follow the injury. This opinion was concurred in by the other doctor, who arrived during the evening. The latter said that Everton had done all that could be done, but consented to remain in the case as chief physician.

There was little gayety at Summit View that evening; the accident had cast a gloom over the household, and neither Allen nor Everton joined the ladies in the parlor.

Morning found the situation unchanged as far as Warburton was concerned. He did not recover his senses, but there was less indication of brain fever than had been anticipated.

Marlowe, who had insisted upon watching with his friend all night, slept through the forenoon and did not rise until lunch was ready. Immediately after this Mr. Edward Wayne asked Allen to walk with him. They went, and while talking, the latter did not notice that they had left the Summit View grounds until Gordon Brentwood's cottage appeared before them.

He paused.

"Are you going further?" he asked.

"If you please," Wayne returned. "Brentwood asked me to come over, and I would like to see him."

Allen no longer regarded the so-called "bookworm" with aversion, and he made no objection. They went on, and were received by Old Doubledark in his parlor. He was a man of the world; he knew how to entertain well; and their reception was all they could desire.

Conversation was uninteresting for awhile, but the detective was preparing for work. They had discussed Hugh's condition, and the way was open.

"Mr. Marlowe," spoke Doubledark, "if we infer that Warburton was assaulted, can you give any theory as to who did the deed?"

"I don't know that he had an enemy," Allen evasively replied.

"That may be, and, at the same time, some one might have a motive for attacking him."

"I have suggested the theory of tramps."

"What about the man who has been blackmailing Estelle Wayne?"

Allen started and looked at the speaker in dismay. The blunt question was not to be misinterpreted, and he knew that a part of the secret he, for one, had guarded so jealously was known to Brentwood. The detective regarded him steadily, but no one could say it was an offensive gaze.

"What do you know about such a thing?" demanded Marlowe, sharply.

"Enough to speak boldly."

"Blackmail is an ugly word."

"Decidedly so."

"And when you connect it with the name of a most estimable lady it becomes—"

Doubledark motioned toward Wayne.

"Bear in mind that the lady's uncle is present."

"He speaks with my sanction," Wayne added.

"You seem to infer that I know about it."

"We do, Allen Marlowe!"

"What cause have you to assume that?"

"You went to Albany lately?"

"Yes," was the hesitating reply.

"Ostensibly," added Doubledark, "you went to Albany; really, you went to the City of New York. That is not all. Almost every moment you were there you were followed by a man. He saw what you saw—and more!"

"Who was this man?"

"Myself!"

Allen's face flushed.

"So you acted the spy!" he bitterly exclaimed.

"Allen!" reprovingly uttered Edward Wayne, "think twice before you use hasty words. Bear in mind that, in the capacity of my brother, the judge, I am the natural protector of Estelle Wayne. Do you think I would wrong her? Whatever this gentleman has done was done with my expressed approval."

Allen looked anxious and worried.

"Mr. Marlowe," added Doubledark, "the time has come for an understanding between us. You and Edward Wayne are the best friends of the young lady, and it is for you and him to speak frankly now."

"You have said that Miss Wayne is being blackmailed?"

"Yes."

"Then why not speak to her about it?"

"Mr. Wayne did so this forenoon, and she denied that she was in the hands of a blackmailer, or in any one's power; and she declared that she was in no trouble."

"Isn't that enough?"

"No. We must save her in spite of herself. Edward Wayne confesses that he lost his courage during the interview with her, and I can well believe it when we consider his statement that he did not even refer to her late visit to New York. Perhaps it was just as well, for I suspect that she would not speak out under any circumstances. Now, we must save her despite herself!"

"What, if I may ask, is your interest in the case?"

"I am a detective!"

Again Allen's face flushed.

"How long have you been on this case?"

"Ever since you have."

"And you have come and gone among us, hiding your true character—"

"Mr. Marlowe, this has gone far enough!" sternly interrupted Wayne. "I believe you have a chivalrous regard for Estelle, but you must also have wisdom. You sit in the presence of her uncle, and of my representative. Mr. Gordon Brentwood is a gentleman, a detective of high repute, and my confidential agent in this matter. Do I need to say more?"

If silence was to be taken as an answer, more at first seemed needed. It had been Allen's desire to guard all of Estelle's secrets carefully: to shield her from the suspicion of every one; and he was as obstinate at this moment as a man could be. He remembered, however, that he had made no progress, and was now deprived of Hugh's aid.

Delay might be dangerous to Estelle.

"I waive all my own views," he answered, after a long pause. "I put myself in your hands without reservation."

"Sensibly spoken," returned Doubledark. "Now, sir, I have been some time on this case, but I am free to say it is the most baffling one of my career. I began without knowing who the plotter was, the nature of his plot, or even against whom it was leveled. I have made some progress; I know that the plot is an attempt to blackmail Miss Wayne. Do you know who the blackmailer is?"

"No. Active as he is, he is an 'invisible' man."

"Did your trip to New York bear fruit?"

"Only perplexity."

"I suspected as much. I hope you will bear me no ill-will for my share in it. I was away on this very case; I chanced to see you at the Grand Central when you reached New York, and from that time I followed you. Possibly my conduct displeases you, but it was well meant."

"I don't doubt it."

"Now, Allen," said Wayne, "will you tell us all you know about the matter, from beginning to end?"

Marlowe's last remonstrance had been made, and he told the story freely. He was seldom interrupted. Wayne was painfully moved, and more than once he wiped unnatural perspiration from his forehead, but he had but little to say. Doubledark's few questions were to the point.

The story was told at last, but the last part remained vivid in Allen's mind, and he suddenly cried:

"Why, in heaven's name, did Estelle go to New York?"

"She did not go."

"Of course not; I have told you so; but the girl, Kit, did. Why was it?"

"To pay blackmail," the detective calmly replied.

"Do you know this?"

"I cannot prove it, but the inference is very strong. You are right in saying that Miss Wayne did not go. I have that from another source. Nick Kenney came here to see Kit during her absence. He failed, of course, but did catch sight of Miss Wayne, by chance. I have pumped Nick. Money did it, and the same power has closed his mouth to others. He will not tell that he saw her here."

"What do you make of the affair?"

"Miss Wayne carried out a deception in which Kit Kenney, Emma, and the coachman were her aids. The coachman, who was long in Judge Wayne's service, has been questioned, but he would die for Miss Estelle, if necessary, and not a word will he tell. His part, however, is plain. We know he drove his mistress to and from the depot, or, rather, in the first case, to the ferry—for she went by the Central Railroad. It is clear that, on the first occasion, she rode part of the way back with him, left the carriage at some intermediate point, and then regained the house secretly: and equally clear that, on the second occasion, she was waiting at the intermediate point, entered the carriage there and drove to the depot, as well as back from it."

"It is singular that she was not detected."

"She had Emma to reconnoiter."

"And what," asked Marlowe, "was the object of all this strange work?"

"The blackmail has been paid."

"Where?"

"In New York."

"Not by Kit Kenney?"

"By Kit Kenney."

"How could she do that?"

"She did it," quietly replied Doubledark, "with the money received from the sale of Miss Wayne's diamonds. It was by this sacrifice the blackmail was paid!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE AFFAIR AT THE WINDOW.

"You are on the wrong track, this time," Allen replied.

"How so?" Doubledark asked.

"I have forgotten to say that the diamonds were not taken to New York."

"How do you know? You said you saw the jewel-case."

"So I did, but the diamonds were not in it."

"It is you who is in error. I saw the diamonds—or their substitutes, rather, for they were undoubtedly replaced in New York with imitations. When we came up on the train I was nearer Kit Kenney than you were. She held to the jewel-case as though to her life, but, once, she opened the cover and peered within. I caught the glitter of the diamonds."

Allen had a surprise for Doubledark, but he was willing to let him go on.

"How do you explain all this?" he asked.

"The diamonds were taken by Kit to New York and replaced with cheap imitations—we all know how well art can do such work. These imitations were wholly, or partially, prepared before Kit reached the city, which explains why she did not need to stay there long."

"How do you know this?"

"You remember her male companion in the car?"

"Yes."

"He was a jeweler, or a jeweler's assistant. You know that he came to this place to meet Kit, traveled with her to New York, and re-

turned with her. Well, they were mutual checks upon each other."

"In what way?"

"You remember the man who visited Miss Wayne late at night, some time before the mysterious journey? Emma was then angry at her mistress; she betrayed to you the fact that some man was coming; you saw him enter the east door; and Emma overheard and told you a part of the conversation the man had with Miss Wayne in her room. She wrongly inferred that her mistress was buying, not selling."

"I remember all that."

"That man was the same one who traveled with Kit, or a member of the same firm, or a clerk. Miss Wayne had decided to dispose of her diamonds and replace them with imitations, to pay the blackmail. She was undoubtedly afraid to ask for such a large sum of money when she could not account for the way in which it went. Having decided, she had the jeweler come to Summit View secretly, and there the bargain was made. Emma overheard a part of it."

"True."

"The responsibility of carrying the diamonds to New York, and of bringing back the imitations, was shared by both parties. Kit went along to see that the jeweler did not steal them; he was there to see that Kit did not steal them. As for Miss Wayne, she trusted both enough to feel that, together, they could be trusted fully."

"Is this any more than a theory on your part?"

"No."

"It is ingenious, but not correct!"

"No! How do you know?"

"The diamonds never left Summit View!"

"Eh?"

Allen repeated his assertion.

"How do you know?" repeated the detective.

"When Hugh Warburton saw Miss Wayne in her father's room, by chance, she wore her diamonds. Hence they could not have been away."

"Warburton must have been in error."

"He said that he was positive."

"I felt sure that Estelle would not dispose of her diamonds!" cried Edward Wayne, triumphantly.

Old Doubledark plunged his hands far down into his pockets, closed one eye and looked thoughtfully at a ray of sunshine which had penetrated to the room through the window.

"Check to the king!" he composedly observed.

"My elaborate theory trembles to its base. Query. Does it fall? There have been many things in this case hard to comprehend, and we are not through with them yet. So much the better; an easy victory is no honor."

"Let us leave this point," interrupted Wayne, "and consider another. Who is Estelle's unknown enemy?"

Allen waited Doubledark's reply eagerly.

"That is what we must now find out," the detective quietly returned.

"I still mistrust Everton!" declared Allen.

"Do you see how he combats the idea that Hugh got his hurt by other means than a fall?"

"You infer that he may have hired some one to assault Hugh, knowing he was dangerous?"

"That is it exactly."

"I hope Warburton will soon be able to speak for himself," answered Doubledark. "It may have been only a fall, but if it was an attempt at murder we have our 'invisible' man on the hip—when we catch him. It will send him to Sing Sing for a good, long term."

"Do this," exclaimed Allen, "and you can count me your friend forever."

"All right, Mr. Marlowe: I shall claim your friendship. One thing I wish to impress upon both of you—silence and secrecy are vitally necessary in this case. If you make any talk with others you may ruin all; therefore, speak to no one about it. Be careful that you do not give the idea away that I am a detective."

Both Wayne and Marlowe promised, and then the former added:

"Will not our 'invisible' man be more invisible than ever? According to your theory, the blackmail has been paid."

"A blackmailer is never satisfied. His victims labor under the impression that a payment to him ends his persecution, but such is rarely the case. Like a carrion crow, which he must resemble, he is prone to come back, for another feast when his maw, otherwise his pocket, grows empty. Our man may come back; or he may not; but let that be as it may, I shall work on what has already been done."

"What is your plan?" asked Marlowe.

"It is not fully matured."

"If I can help you, command me."

"Thank you: I will. My campaign will be more vigorous from this time. Heretofore I have had an unknown plot to deal with, and slow, cautious work was imperatively necessary to success. After this I shall work more energetically."

The interview lasted some time longer, but nothing of importance was developed. The visitors finally returned to Summit View, and Allen felt that he would have good reasons for feeling encouraged if it were not for Hugh's condition. His opinion of Old Doubledark had un-

dergone a complete change, and he placed great reliance in him.

Nothing occurred during the afternoon out of the ordinary course of events. Judge Wayne had reappeared with the family, and in reply to questions, he announced that his health was good—"it had never been better," he added—and he seemed to have no recollection of his late "illness."

Estelle was as attentive to him as ever, and it seemed to Allen that her mood betrayed a happier state of affairs with her. She talked very much as she had done in the old days, and he found new hope growing within him.

Whether she spoke to him, or merely gave him a glance, there was much upon which to base such hopes, he thought, and his spirits increased accordingly.

That evening, after the six o'clock dinner, Allen went to the parlor and stood looking out of the window thoughtfully. Only a few minutes had passed when some one came quietly to his side. He turned and saw Estelle.

"Are you studying Nature through a glass, darkly, Mr. Marlowe?" she asked, lightly.

There was that in her manner and her glance, but especially the latter, which was like the old days when he thought he knew every emotion of her heart, and every thought of love therein was reserved for him.

He thrilled at that look, and for a moment his composure forsook him. He had resolved to obey her earnest request and not refer to the past, or the mysteries of the present, but with her radiant eyes meeting his own, and that gracious smile on her face the resolution was hard to keep.

He controlled himself, however, and answered with responsive lightness.

No one appeared to interrupt them, and for several minutes they conversed in a manner which brought the old days vividly back. Never before since the first shadow of trouble fell across their lives had she been in such a mood with him.

He thought he could understand it, and new hopes began to rise in his mind. Could it be that the dark days had passed? Estelle was incapable of coquetry, and, surely, there must be some reason for this change of manner.

With her tact and intelligence she must be aware of one thing—that she was giving rise to new hopes. Or did she forget all this? Her own manner was unusually joyous for her, even in her happiest moments, and he could not get rid of the idea that she felt as though this was their meeting after a long, long separation. Somehow, the impression became communicated to him, and he felt that, after many days, he had back the girl who had made his life a paradise by pledging her troth to him.

"Yes, surely it was a meeting after a long separation, and the supposed events of the days just past only a black, cruel dream.

Allen almost believed it. He could believe anything as he looked into her eyes, where seemed to be a perspective which no art could measure, but was the inward reflection of her rare, noble nature.

"Do you know that I am happy to-night?" he asked, in an unsteady voice.

"Are you?" she asked, softly, the words accompanied by a glance which destroyed what little composure he had left.

"Yes. And do you know why?"

"You may tell me," she answered, with bright, encouraging archness.

"It is because you are again like yourself."

As he spoke he took her hand, and she made no effort to withdraw it. Her head drooped, the long lashes veiled her lustrous eyes, and fell low on her cheeks, but though she seemed to be looking from the window, he felt that it was not indifference. The blood leaped more quickly through his veins; the dark clouds seemed to roll away; and he felt that they were on the eve of a new understanding.

"Estelle," he began, tenderly, but the sentence was never finished.

Suddenly she uttered a low cry and started from his grasp. He looked at her in surprise. She was looking from the window with eyes large and startled, and her face had become strongly, alarmingly pale.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TRE MAN WITH THE BRONZED FACE.

FOR a moment Estelle continued to look from the window, the startled expression still upon her face; then her glance flashed back to Allen. As she met his wondering gaze the blood suddenly rushed back, dyeing even her temples deeply, and she laughed in a short, nervous way.

Allen took one step forward and looked out of the window.

Estelle caught him by the arm.

"Come away; I hear others approaching!" she exclaimed, in a quick, eager voice.

Steps did sound, and Eddila Raynor's voice arose gayly, but neither to her nor to Estelle's request did Allen give any attention.

He was looking from the window, and believed he had, in part, solved the mystery of Estelle's sudden change of manner.

A man—a stranger to Allen—was passing the house. He was sauntering slowly along the walk, carelessly swinging a cane, and looking up to their window. When Allen appeared in place of Estelle, however, his gaze was quickly withdrawn, and his whole manner became demure and innocent.

Marlowe was not deceived, and he marked the man closely.

He appeared to be somewhat less than thirty years of age, and had the face of an intelligent man, and a gentleman, using that word in its narrower sense. He was slightly formed, fairly well-dressed, and had a face which was either naturally dark or bronzed by contact with sun and wind.

His manner and actions were very suggestive, and though he walked on out of sight without again glancing up, Allen was positive that the stranger was accountable for Estelle's sudden change of manner.

How could this be?—how, unless he was her mysterious enemy, "the invisible man?"

He fixed the personal appearance of the man indelibly in his mind, and then yielded to the touch of Estelle's hand, to which was now joined Miss Raynor's gay question:

What! has the man turned to a statue of stone, like Somebody-or-other, whose name I've forgotten?"

Allen forced himself to turn and make suitable reply, but he hardly knew what he had said. His eyes again sought Estelle's face. It was then neither pale nor flushed; she was once more herself, outwardly, and with a light utterance she suggested a game of whist with Allen and Eddila as partners against Clara and herself; and she brought out the cards and placed chairs without giving any one a chance to accept or decline the invitation.

Marlowe did not fail to understand her ruse; she was determined that he should not follow the bronze-faced man.

He yielded to his fate and the four devoted themselves to whist, but both Estelle and Allen played a wretched game. Both, too, were silent and absent-minded. What Estelle was thinking of was uncertain, but all the old manner, the return of which had so delighted Allen, had disappeared.

On his own part he hardly knew what cards he held.

He was bitterly disappointed.

He felt sure he had been on the eve of an understanding with Estelle when the sudden appearance of the stranger so utterly ruined all—ruined, because he felt sure from Estelle's manner that the chance was past. Whatever significance the appearance of the unknown had, it had thrown all back to its previous state of uncertainty.

Feeling in anything but a mood for the game, he tried to escape after awhile, but Estelle would not allow it.

She insisted in her peculiar, courteous, but firm way that he should continue to play, and held him prisoner until the evening was well advanced.

When the playing ended she frustrated all his efforts to speak privately with her, and it was in this unenviable state that he was compelled to retire for the night.

Mysteries were accumulating upon mysteries, and it need scarcely be said that meditation helped him none when he reached his chamber.

When the household met in the morning Estelle was in her calm, self-possessed mood. She met Allen's gaze fearlessly, but no more was to be read in her eyes and face than the senseless atmosphere expressed.

The riddle had become a riddle again.

After breakfast she retired to her own rooms, and Allen left the house and walked away down the river. He found himself near the village before he realized it, and then came a sudden idea.

There was a possibility that the bronze-faced stranger was stopping at the hotel. He would go there and see if he was visible.

It was not a long walk, and he was soon in the office. The register lay open on the desk, and he was about to examine it when a key was laid down in front of the clerk.

"Good-morning, Mr. Frazer," said the clerk, as he took the key and hung it in its place.

"Good-morning, sir," replied a polite, well-modulated voice beside Allen.

The latter turned. The bronze-faced man stood beside him. If the stranger was conscious of this regard he gave no evidence of it, but, making some trivial remark, passed quietly out of the office and the hotel.

Allen turned to the clerk.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"A new-comer. Here is his name in the register—'Guerdon Frazer, Topeka, Kansas.' He came to us last night for the first time, and stated that, as he was a man of leisure, he might remain for some time."

Allen made no reply; he was mentally repeating the name, "Guerdon Frazer!" Where had he heard it before? Sometime in the past it had fallen on his ears, yet, peculiar as it was, it was hard to recall.

He left the hotel, but Mr. Frazer had already disappeared. Allen wandered along homeward,

but only half the distance had been passed when he came to a sudden stop.

The answer to his mental question had flashed upon him, and he remembered where he had heard that name before.

The recollection startled him.

His mind went back to Hugh Warburton's account of that old rumor which had made Estelle the bride of Doctor Everton when she was a girl of fifteen years; and he remembered the opinion advanced by Hugh's friends, in his letter, that the two actually might have been married, not by the old minister, but by his wild young nephew, "newly-fledged as a preacher, but without an appointment."

And the name of this nephew had been Guerdon Frazer!

It was a startling recollection, for it brought troublesome thoughts in its train.

Guerdon Frazer was back East; he had come to the vicinity of Summit View, not as a "man of leisure," in Allen's opinion, but with a deeper, darker motive; and first sight of him had plainly frightened Estelle.

Why had he come? Clearly, not with any good motive, and Allen now had a theory to account for the identity of the invisible man which seemed to promise something.

The invisible man, whoever he was, had, Allen believed, been levying blackmail upon Estelle because of some secret hold he had upon her. If Frazer had really married Estelle to Everton, who was better situated to wield the rod of terror above her helpless head?

According to the report, Frazer, though qualified to preach, had never filled any pulpit. He was wild and dissipated, and, before he secured a position, he had fallen into disgrace and fled the East.

Such a man would not hesitate to persecute and blackmail a lady.

The mystery began to lighten, somewhat, he thought, and he walked on toward Summit View in a happier frame of mind. Against the invisible man he had been powerless, because he could not positively fix his identity, but if Mr. Guerdon Frazer persisted in making himself obnoxious he could, and should, be punished. With the secret foe revealed, and old Doubledark in the case, matters were on a very different footing.

As though the thought of the detective had accomplished the result, Allen at that moment saw Doubledark advancing along the path. The young man hastened to join him, and without any delay he hurriedly made known what he could tell about Frazer.

Doubledark listened with grave attention, but made no comments until all was told.

"Describe the man fully," he then directed.

Allen complied to the best of his ability.

"I, too, have seen the man," Doubledark added. "I was passing through Wayne's garden a few minutes ago, and had paused to watch the old servant at his work—you may have noticed the man—when our dark-faced party appeared. He was a stranger to me, but I observed that the old gardener seemed to recognize him; he looked after Frazer until the latter disappeared, and then shook his head gravely and resumed work."

"He knew no good of Frazer."

"Exactly my idea. Wait here, Marlowe, and I will go and question the servant. He is very old and feeble, and is likely to be garrulous. Sit down, and I may be able to bring you news of value."

Allen readily agreed, and he took place on a rock and tried to wait patiently until the detective returned. He was not in an enviable frame of mind, and it was well for his patience that Doubledark was gone a far shorter time than was to be expected. When he returned he came with long steps, and before he could be questioned, his report was begun.

"The attempt has borne fruit," he announced, "and the old gardener has given new points—if they are true."

"What did he say?"

"He proved as talkative as I could wish, and spoke right out, after saying that he knew I was an honest man and a true friend of the Wayne family. This was the over-confidence of extreme old age, but we will let it pass. He, like many of the other servants here, was transferred from Judge Wayne's establishment, and he served the latter thirty years."

"It was not hard to get him to talk about the dark-faced man whose appearance caused him to shake his head so gravely. That man was, really, Guerdon Frazer. The gardener had supposed him to be in the West, and he was troubled by his new coming among old acquaintances."

"In brief, the gardener has put a new face upon the report that Miss Wayne and Everton were married by Guerdon Frazer. His ideas were gathered from the gossip of servants at the time of the rumored marriage, but, while we may well think twice before believing the report fully, it is a fact that servants sometimes know a good deal of inside family history."

"Here is the gardener's picture of the three principals in that old rumor:

"Of Frazer he said he was a young minister who, being wild and dissipated, never had a chance to preach."

"Of Everton he spoke well, representing him as a worthy gentleman who was the good friend, but not the lover of Miss Wayne."

"Of Estelle he said that, at fifteen, she was very different from the Miss Wayne of to-day. She looked two or three years older than she was, but her character was unformed; in fact, she was a bit wild and willful in those days, though nobody could be freer from the need of actual blame. Unfortunately, she met Guerdon Frazer at this critical time of life."

"He was wholly unscrupulous, and, according to this new report, formed the plot of marrying Miss Estelle to get her money. He did win her affection—bear in mind that she was only a child, Marlowe—and they carried on a secret courtship, as young girls will with men of whom they know but little. Estelle, though, soon saw her folly and tried to remedy it."

"It was at this time that George Everton came into the case—as Estelle's defender. She was terribly afraid that the judge would know of her acquaintance with young Frazer, and, as she needed somebody's help, sought that of Everton. The gardener is in the dark as to just what Everton had to do, but, as near as can be learned, she had written some foolish, romantic letters which, after their quarrel, Frazer held over her head as a rod of terror, and it was Everton's work to get them back."

"He accompanied Estelle to the parsonage; there was a stormy scene, but Everton was not to be frightened off; and it ended with the surrender of the letters by Frazer. That ended it, and she was free from further persecution."

"Such is the theory from the servant's point of view."

"This changes the situation," observed Allen, thoughtfully.

"Radically."

"And puts Everton in a high light," Allen added, with a natural twinge of jealousy.

"And Frazer in a low one."

"Is it not likely that he is the secret foe?" asked Marlowe, eagerly.

"It is possible, but—"

Old Doubledark paused, hesitated, and then rapidly added:

"I infer that if Frazer still has a hold upon Miss Wayne it is because all of those letters were not given up. I regard it as necessary that we should have an eye to the man, and I will now follow on in the direction he has gone and see if I can get further light. If you will remain near here, I'll see you again."

"I'll wait in the garden."

"Good! I'll join you before long."

Doubledark hurried away, and Allen walked on to the garden. The old servitor was still there, and they entered into conversation, Allen taking care, however, to speak only on trivial matters.

Perhaps ten minutes had passed when a sound of a revolver-shot was followed by the appearance of a boy who was running toward them. He seemed to be in a state of considerable alarm, and he flung out one arm with an excited gesture.

"Hi there, mister!" he cried, loudly, "come this way, or murder will be done!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

KIT KENNEY'S REVOLVER.

THE old gentleman stared at the boy in speechless surprise, but not so Allen Marlowe.

He recognized the boy as Nick Kenney, and his excited words went far toward giving force and color to the fact of the revolver-shot. From Allen's experience with the boy he was inclined to think that he would not so lose his usual coolness without good cause.

Seeing, also, that Nick had addressed him, not the gardener, he was not slow to obey.

He ran to meet Nick, at the same time crying:

"Turn about, and show me the way! What is wrong?"

"Murder!" Nick reiterated.

"Who is murdered?"

"Nobody when I was there."

"Who was in danger?"

"It was a toss-up, but it may interest ye ter know that Estelle Wayne was as bad off as anybody!"

It was a startling statement, especially as Allen remembered that Guerdon Frazer had just gone that way, but there was no more time for questions.

Their headlong race ended as they broke through the sparse line of bushes, and saw the scene of whatever had occurred. But there, much to Marlowe's relief, stood Estelle, uninjured.

And in front of her, revolver in hand, stood Kit Kenney, looking toward the river.

The daughter of the barbarians made an imposing appearance, and might have been taken as a model of some ancient heroine at bay, were it not for her decidedly modern appearance; but though she looked so warlike, there seemed to be no reason therefor.

No one was visible against whom her wrath might properly be leveled.

Allen's speed moderated somewhat, but his

eyes were keen enough to convince him that there had been reason for the shot, and for Kit's attitude.

Estelle was pale and agitated, and to her he at once addressed himself.

"Miss Wayne, what is wrong?"

She met his gaze unsteadily, and faltered, rather than answered, one word:

"Nothing."

"Then what meant that revolver-shot?"

"Ain't we very inquisitive?" put in Kit, with a toss of her head. "Is lead so costly that a little lump can't be thrown away? I fired at a target!"

"So you did," corroborated a small, keen voice, which could only be Nick Kenney's. "I seen you, and the way the target jumped was a caution to pickerel. But, see here, sis, it's against the law to take a man for a target, and—"

Kit stamped her foot on the ground, and her dusky eyes flashed angrily, as she interrupted her small brother.

"Will you be still?" she cried. "You'd better get back over the river, and leave us alone."

Nick grinned provokingly.

"Not for Joseph!" he replied. "I see you want to muzzle me, but Al Marlowe and me are friends and allies. Mister, the target was a man—he that is stopping at the hotel—and he got a bullet so near his ear that the atmosphere quaked, I guess. Seems that he skipped, too, though I didn't think he would do it."

"Nick Kenney, I'll have a settlement with you!" cried Kit, still more warmly; but Miss Wayne now came to the front with a gesture so impressive that even the boy's nimble tongue was silenced.

"There is no occasion for a quarrel," she said, and her old, calm self-possession was in word, manner and expression. "In one word, Mr. Marlowe, some strolling vagabond tried to frighten us, but Kit used her revolver so well that the tables were turned."

"Where is the man now?"

"Judging from the rate of speed with which he began his retreat, he may be at West Point by this time," Estelle lightly replied. "I am going to the house, Mr. Marlowe; will you keep me company?"

Allen understood the invitation. Once more she was planning to keep him from investigating, but he had much rather obey than offend her.

He glanced at Nick and received a secret wink. That signified that the boy was to be found when wanted, and Allen hesitated no longer.

He promptly accepted her invitation and they started side by side. Kit would have lingered to take Nick to task, but he laughed knowingly and beat a hurried retreat; so she followed the other two at a distance.

"Let me speak of something more cheerful than the scene just past," said Estelle, giving Allen no time to question her. "It was nothing of consequence, and Kit was as hasty in using the revolver as she was in carrying it at all."

Having made this vague explanation she turned the conversation into a minor channel, and talked so steadily that Allen could not very well have referred to the adventure if he had wished.

But he made no effort to do so. He was firm in his resolution not to trouble her with unpleasant questions, and was well enough satisfied while he was by her side, with the tones of her musical, well-modulated voice in his ears and her matchless eyes turned upon him.

He was content to be her prisoner, but he did not forget what had just occurred.

Sooner or later he intended to see Nick and hear what the boy had to tell.

If Estelle was mentally disturbed she concealed the fact admirably, and with womanly skill conducted him to the parlor where Eddila, Clara and Doctor Everton were already gathered. Even then her careful watch over him did not cease; he was kept captive until after lunch.

This seemed to please him more than it did another member of the company.

He felt that he could afford to wait, and was satisfied while Estelle so openly devoted herself to him, but he would have been blind had he failed to notice the effect of this on Doctor Everton.

The latter was not neglected by Miss Wayne, but he was plainly dissatisfied. He scowled at Allen, and said several positively rude things, but every one overlooked it, and Allen did his share of masquerading and seemed at ease.

It was a farce, however, and he was so dissatisfied with his position that the old idea of leaving Summit View more than once recurred to him. It came, but when he looked into Estelle's lustrous eyes his resolution wavered; he met her smile, and was willing to remain and fight this battle in the dark, as long as one hope remained of winning her affection anew.

After lunch, finding that he was no longer wanted as a captive, he walked out to the bluff.

He hoped to meet Nick Kenney, but, so much time had elapsed, was not confident of doing so.

He found the place deserted, and, standing still, began to wonder what scene had been ended by the revolver-shot. Estelle's attempt to make light of it did not deceive him. Wild as Kit Kenney was she would not have used a revolver on slight provocation, nor would Nick have been thrown into such a panic.

The boy could carry a cool head through almost any event.

As Nick seemed to have deserted the vicinity, Allen was actually meditating a visit to the hotel, to see if Frazer had returned, when, in moving restlessly about, he chanced to observe a paper lying half-concealed in the edge of the bushes.

He picked it up.

It was a sheet of note-paper, clean and carefully folded, and he at once proceeded to examine the whole of it. He was well rewarded; it was no blank paper, but a note, which read as follows:

"My Own Dear GUERDON:—

"Your unexpected return has filled me with emotions which I will not try to describe on paper—there is not enough paper in the whole world to express all I feel. But if you will meet me as named in your letter—with one change; make the hour eleven, to-night—I will try to tell you what I cannot write. Enough for now that I never loved you more, and shall never love you less."

"Ever your devoted,

"ESTELLE."

Allen crushed the note in his hand. His face was dark with anger, and his lips quivered strangely. His usual power over his temper was not then in force, and he felt a wild desire to visit his wrath on somebody's head.

"What next? What next?" he cried, aloud. "Is all the world leagued to strike me to the heart?"

"Maybe you'd like to know who wrote that epistle?"

It was a quiet, inquiring voice behind him, and he wheeled and saw Nick Kinney.

"'Twas the white man with colored blood," the boy explained; "him that's stopping at the village, and that Kit nearly revolterated. Saw him drop the epistle."

"That part is plain," replied Allen, suddenly growing calm, "but some other things are not. See, here is a dollar. Tell me just what led to the attempted shooting."

"Your dollar I'll take," Nick answered, "not because I covet the hundred cents, but because you may spend it foolishly if I don't take it; but as for the row, and so forth, I know but little about it. What I know, I'll tell."

"You see, I was skulking along the bluff for reasons best known to N. Kenney, Esquire, and not of public moment, when I heard loud and angry voices. Now, if there is any one thing I do on more than another, it's a row, and I fairly tore up the turf, I run so fast to see and hear."

"Well, I broke cover, and this is what I saw: There was that mulatto chap who has just come to the village—Frazer, I believe he calls himself—and Miss Wayne, facing each other, both angry, and she right pale; but between them was my sister Kit, and I tell you she was just mad enough to loosen one's front teeth."

"She looked seven feet high, and she had one hand stretched out toward Frazer sort of threatening-like, and her eyes were just blazing."

"Take yourself off out of sight," says she, "or you are a dead man in less than five hours!"—five minutes, I mean." But he laughed sort of mocking and aggravating.

"Go get your claws sharpened before you scratch, my fair colored girl," he sneered.

"Now, if there is anything that will make Kit get right up and shout blue-blazes, it is to be slandered like that, and when it comes to being twitted by a man as dark as she, it was more than flesh could bear."

"She jerked the pistol from her pocket like a fish."

"Get away from here, or I'll shoot you dead!" she cried, white around the lips and red in the cheeks.

"Now, I know our Kit well enough so that I was scared then. She meant all she said, and I didn't want her to have human blood on her hands, if she was a barbarian, so, knowing where you was, I run that way like a scared rabbit for its den. That's all I know, but I've seen Frazer since, down at the hotel, and I tell you he's lucky to have a whole hide, mister, after riling our Kit up so powerful!"

"What was the quarrel about?"

"Don't know."

"What cause had Kit to dislike Frazer?"

"Kit! Land o' love! it wa'n't her quarrel. She never had a lover, and all rows spring originally from love. Must have been Miss Wayne's quarrel—and you and I know her of old!"

Allen frowned at this blunt speech, but they were then interrupted by the arrival of Old Doubledark. He came up quietly, and at once tendered a coin to Nick.

"My lad," he said, "this is to pay you for going to the hotel, to see if Frazer is there now."

"Hullo!" quoth Nick, "be you interested, too?"

"Yes."

"Seems ter be spreading, I yum! How'sever

I know the value of your bullion of old. If Allen says I'm to go, I'm off."

"I shall be glad to have you obey Mr. Brentwood."

"Here I go!"

With this laconic farewell, Nick hastened away, and Doubledark turned to Marlowe.

"That errand was only a *ruse* to be rid of our young ally for awhile. I wished to speak with you privately."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LETTER IS CALLED FOR.

"HAVE you made new discoveries?" Allen asked quickly.

"A few, but before I tell them, let me hear your own experience since we parted."

Allen described briefly how he had been alarmed in the garden by Nick's sudden arrival; how the scene had been interrupted at the bluff; and how he had subsequently returned and found the letter.

"What do you infer?" Doubledark quietly asked.

"I should say that Frazer stood revealed as the unknown blackmailer were it not for the letter he accidentally dropped here. That puts a new face on the matter. Read that!" Marlowe savagely added, "and you will see that Estelle confesses love for the scoundrel."

He extended the letter, and the detective read it without a change of expression.

"What of this?" he asked.

"Does it not speak for itself?"

"It does, but you have not read it aright. You have seen only the words themselves; you should have read between the lines. You infer that this was lately written, and that Estelle welcomes Frazer here with affection?"

"Yes; but do you mean—"

"Observe this penmanship. See its primness, and its orthodox devotion to the petty details of lines and loops. All school-girls write that way; they have a model and follow it religiously; but, in later life, copy-book forms are forgotten or ignored, and each woman writes to please herself, or as near to it as possible."

"Ha!" Marlowe exclaimed, "can it be that—"

"I'll wager all you wish that this letter is six years old. I take it that you know Miss Wayne's writing well enough to be sure this is hers. Well, no doubt it is, but 'tis the writing of a school-girl Miss Wayne. It was penned when she did have a foolish liking for Frazer, six years ago, when she was a miss of fifteen. Our gardener was right, I reckon."

"You don't know what a load you have lifted from my mind!" Allen cried.

"I can guess," was the dry reply.

"I ought to have surmised the truth at once, but it was left for a deeper head than mine. Now, then, does not Frazer stand revealed as the blackmailer?"

"Hum! Well, we shall see. A word more about the late interview. I missed Frazer, when I followed him, but an interview I have since overheard between Kit Kenney and Emma, the other servant, may interest you."

"Let me hear about it."

"Kit told Emma how she and Estelle met Frazer; how Miss Wayne refused to enter into conversation with him until he stooped and whispered something in her ear; how she (Kit) was then sent aside, and an angry interview followed between Miss Wayne and the man, during which he produced this letter; and how, after being defied and appealed to, in turn, but in vain, he finally lost all control of himself, and caught Estelle rudely by the arm. It was then that Kit fired at him, and he is lucky to have life left in him!"

"Noble Kit!" exclaimed Allen.

"As a rule I don't take to women who carry revolvers, but I will trust Kit Kenney."

"Can't we question her?"

"We can, but it would be only to fail. We might as well question an image of stone. Kit was put in yonder house by the blackmailer as a spy over Miss Wayne, and to transact business between them—although I have myself heard Kit say she had, and has, no idea who the blackmailer is—but she came to love her young mistress, and, now, would fight like a tiger for her."

"As she did to-day?"

"Yes."

"If she had shot to kill, we should have been rid of the mysterious blackmailer forever."

A peculiar expression passed over Doubledark's face.

"We'll bring our blackmailer up short; but, for now, let us speak of the letter you hold. It belongs to Frazer, don't it?"

"Yes."

Allen slowly straightened the crumpled letter, but, as he did so, a new voice suddenly broke in upon them:

"Well, then, I'll trouble you to give me my own!"

Marlowe turned abruptly. There stood Mr. Guerdon Frazer, with one arm outstretched. His face was calm, but there was a glitter in his eyes which told of a gathering storm.

"You say the letter is mine," Frazer added. "Very well; I knew I had lost it. I'll take it now."

There was a brief, ominous silence, during which the two men faced each other steadily. Allen saw one whom he believed to be his worst enemy, and his hostility was plainly expressed in his face, but Frazer was airily, almost insolently, at his ease.

Doubledark stood passive, willing to test his ally now that a chance was given, but neither of the other men was as cool and far-seeing as he.

"Perhaps you did not hear what I said," suggested Frazer, when he had waited awhile. "You have stated that you have a letter which I lost. With your permission I will take it now."

Allen prepared for a conflict, of wits or otherwise, with the claimant. He did not intend to surrender the letter without orders from Estelle, and he held Frazer in no fear.

"Did you speak to me?" he asked.

"Beyond doubt."

"And your words referred to the paper I hold?"

"Yes."

"Excuse me, but how am I to know your name?"

"You will find it in the letter. I am Guerdon Frazer. You have said that the letter belongs to me, and you are right. It is mine. I am in haste, and with your permission, as I said before, I'll take it and go."

He still spoke with the politeness of one born and bred a gentleman, but there was an undercurrent not so smooth and bland. Evidently, he was prepared to press his claim to the utmost.

"How could you lose it here?" Allen asked.

"These are private grounds."

"Allow me to ask one question. Is, or is not, my Christian name mentioned in that note?" curtly asked the bronze-faced man, a disagreeable expression hovering around his mouth.

"My question has the precedence of yours," coolly replied Allen. "These are private grounds, and no one can justly come here uninvited. If you have lost anything, show why you were here, anyway."

"Oh! come, this is nonsense!"

"From your point of view."

"All this ceremony is a waste of time."

"From your point of view."

Frazer scowled in a most unamiable way.

"See here!" he exclaimed, "do you mean to set yourself deliberately as my enemy? You hold property in your hand which you know to be mine. I can place but one construction on your refusal to give it to me."

"By the way, what is that?"

"That you want trouble with me."

Allen smiled most exasperatingly. He was cool, while Frazer was angry, and as he had conceived a strong hatred for the man, he experienced a good deal of satisfaction in thus irritating him.

"In what way would trouble come?" he quietly asked.

Frazer's lips unclosed and a hot reply trembled upon them, but he curbed his anger and spoke earnestly, moderately, almost pleadingly.

"Sir, I appeal to your honor as a gentleman," he said. "You have my property. Is it not your duty to surrender it to me? Imagine yourself in my place; suppose that I held a letter of yours and you wanted it back. What would you think of a refusal on my part? I put this matter to you as from one gentleman to another. Is it not your duty to give me my own property?"

He was no bungler; he knew how to make the most of courtesy.

"I have no proof that you lost the letter," Allen dryly replied. "Another person's name is on it; she may have been the loser. Should she bid me give it to you, it is yours within the hour. Shall I go now and ask her?"

"Curse this delay!" cried Frazer, growing angry again. "Will you, or will you not give, it to me at once--this minute?"

"I will not, Mr. Frazer!"

"Then, by the flends! I'll make you!"

Two steps Frazer took toward the man who was at last his acknowledged enemy, but he came to a sudden halt. Old Doubledark, heretofore silent and phlegmatic, reached out and caught his arm.

"Quietly, young man!" cautioned the detective. "I shall allow no hostilities here. You have been offered a chance to appeal to the writer of the note—that is your only hope of getting the paper."

Frazer had made a struggle, but it was all in vain. He was young and "wiry," but he found the detective's strength superior to his own. His spirit was not crushed, however, and further trouble would have occurred had it not been for a simple circumstance.

There was a slight crashing of the bushes a few paces away, and the trio looked and saw Edward Wayne approaching. The sight acted like magic upon Frazer. With a quick motion he escaped Doubledark's hold and sprung into the bushes in a course away from Wayne.

"Let him go!" directed the detective.

"But we may not have another chance to catch the scoundrel!" urged Allen.

"Don't fear. Leave it to me, and I'll answer for him."

Edward Wayne came up.

"Who in the world is running away so hotly?" he asked.

"I will explain to you directly, sir," Doubledark returned. "Marlowe, when Frazer so suddenly interrupted us I was about to say that, though the note was his, I approved of showing it to the writer at once."

"Is it best?"

"Decidedly so, I think. Let us see what will be said to it."

This was enough for Allen, and he left his companions and walked rapidly toward the house. He was eager to see if Estelle would confirm Doubledark's opinion.

Fortune favored him so far that he found Estelle alone on the piazza. This was encouraging, and he advanced to her side and extended the note with an air of carelessness.

"Here," he observed, quietly, "is a curiosity I found on the bluff. It may be of interest to you."

She flashed one quick look upward to his face, and he knew his reference to the bluff had revealed a good deal. For a moment she appeared to make a struggle for composure, but the battle was soon won.

She smiled, thanked him and, taking the paper, unfolded it with hands which did not reveal a tremor.

Its contents did not prove so favorable to calm self-possession, and a red tide flushed over cheek and brow as she perused her own words. Then she again looked up and met his gaze.

"You have read this?" she asked.

"Yes."

He expected her to speak again, but she did not. Her gaze had wandered away to the emerald sea of tree-tops before her, and her face gradually assumed its usual appearance. She seemed now to be in deep thought rather than anything else, and Allen began to doubt. Then her gaze came back and rested again on his face.

"Mr. Marlowe," she said, earnestly, "you have done me a great service, for which I am very grateful to you. Accept my sincere thanks until you are better rewarded. This note I will at once consign to the fire before it is again lost."

With these words she arose and moved toward the door, leaving Allen standing mute with surprise and bitter disappointment. Was this all the reward he was to reap for returning a paper which would certainly have made her trouble?

Even at the door, however, she suddenly paused and then came quickly back to him.

"Did you notice anything peculiar about this note?" she abruptly asked.

"Peculiar? Well, that depends upon what you mean. The words are—suggestive of peculiarity. That is to say—"

"I mean the handwriting," she interrupted, just as he grew embarrassed. "Is it mine?"

"I thought it yours."

"Is there nothing peculiar about it?"

"I appears cramped."

"Is it the writing of a woman, or of a school-girl?"

"It differs from other specimens I have seen of your penmanship," he confessed.

"So it may well do, for it was written six years ago, when I was a girl of fifteen. Such being the case, it is of no value, but in two minutes it will be in ashes!"

With these words she once more moved away.

Allen was tempted to call her back, for he believed her fully, and his heart had grown light, but he decided to be patient, and not force further explanation. Not once doubting that the "invisible" blackmailer was revealed in the person of Guerdon Frazer, he felt that the case would soon be settled. He was sorry they had not secured the rascal when they could, for he might be frightened away, but decided to rest as easy as possible on the belief that the detective knew his business.

Leaving the house, he returned to where he had left Doubledark and Wayne, to make his report, but they had disappeared.

He waited for some time, but they did not come, and he concluded to go back and take an extra turn at Hugh Warburton's bedside.

He had nearly reached the house when he saw a man on the piazza who, obviously, had just rung the bell. At that moment the door opened, and, after a moment's delay, he walked calmly inside.

Marlowe stood dumfounded.

The man was Guerdon Frazer!

CHAPTER XXXI.

HEARD IN AMBUSH.

WHEN Allen left Wayne and Doubledark by the bluff the latter watched him out of sight, and then turned to his companion.

"We will walk up the river," he suggested.

"Very well," Wayne replied. "I see there is something new, and am anxious to hear what it is."

"You shall. For Miss Wayne's sake I would be glad to keep it secret, but, in one sense, you are my employer, and there is nothing worse against her than girlish folly. As Judge Wayne

is so broken-down you are her natural protector, and I have no choice in the matter."

He then told all that he knew about Guerdon Frazer. The story filled Wayne with indignation, but he found one crumb of consolation in it.

"Tis clear he is the mysterious blackmailer," the old gentleman exclaimed.

"I doubt it."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Who, then, is the man?"

"I might suggest any one of several persons, going as high as Everton, or as low as your ground-keeper, but I prefer to wait until I can offer proof of what I am now certain. Slight clews have been falling into my hands, and I feel sure I shall soon be able to put my hand on Miles Rogerson, blackmailer and blackleg. I have a wary eye to him, to see that he does not run away. Now, hero is one clew I don't mind revealing."

The detective drew a folded paper from his pocket.

"As soon as I got the story of the exchanged diamonds from Marlowe," the speaker added, "I felt sure that I knew how to learn more. I, too, had seen the companion of Kit Kenney on the train, and I was almost positive that I recognized him. I telegraphed to a detective friend in New York, instructing him to act for me, and how to do it. Here is his report."

He passed over the paper and Wayne read rapidly. The writing was as follows:

"Called upon the jeweler. Was induced to talk only by means of threats. Confessed that he bought diamonds of E. W., at date named, and replaced them with Al imitations. It was his assistant who traveled with girl. Bargain was made with jeweler as early as August first, by a man. Said party was suspected by jeweler to be a 'crook,' and was followed to his quarters. Was undoubtedly disguised, but I will learn who he was, if possible. Shall I?"

Wayne looked up quickly.

"Everton was in New York the first of August!" he announced.

"Aha! is that so?"

"Yes."

"If he was the man who bargained for the sale of the diamonds we shall soon know it. My detective friend will solve the riddle, for I have telegraphed back to that effect."

"Will he do the work as well as you would?"

Old Doubledark smiled in a peculiar way.

"There is enough for me to do here," he replied.

"I have a theory that you know more about this matter than you have told."

"I have some striking clews which, however, are more suggestive to professional than ordinary eyes."

"I don't ask you to be precipitate. I have faith in your ability to do the work, and am willing you should use your own judgment."

"Thank you. I'll reward your confidence by achieving a success. I am now far enough advanced to say that without boasting. By the way, do you remember the object which Marlowe saw descend from Miss Wayne's window, at the beginning of this affair?"

"Yes."

"That was Nick Kenney. He carried a letter for the blackmailer to Miss Wayne; his retreat by ordinary channels was cut off; a rope which had that day been in use for other purposes was called into service, and Nick slid down. He has told me as much, though he was reluctant to do it, having an idea that he might get into trouble."

"Strange, lamentable things have this summer occurred at Summit View!" observed Wayne, with a deep sigh.

"They are about over; be cheered by that. And now let us return to the house."

They went, and, meeting Mrs. Wayne in the hall, were surprised to see her face unusually bright and happy.

"I have good news for you," she announced. "Hugh Warburton has recovered consciousness."

"Thank heaven!" Wayne exclaimed.

"I echo your expression of pleasure," added Doubledark, "and I hope we shall now soon have an account of how his accident came about."

"True," Wayne replied. "I have felt guilty to rest so easy when he may have been the victim of an assassin, and that one, too, a man we ought to catch. Hugh's good luck in recovering is our good luck, too."

"He has told his story," pursued Mrs. Wayne.

"Ha! what is it?"

"He could only infer that a stone fell from the top of the cliff and struck him. He was walking quietly along at the base of the bluff when, suddenly, he lost consciousness."

"I remember there were loose stones near at hand," said Doubledark.

"The explanation does not satisfy me," Wayne declared, thoughtfully. "A man may have crept up behind him on the sand and dealt the blow."

"We will talk with him when he gets stronger," Doubledark promised.

"Doctor Everton is up-stairs in his own room, if you wish to see him."

Mr. Wayne and the detective decided to do so, and they went up accordingly. Everton received them cordially, and explained Hugh's condition. He was fully conscious, but was very weak, physically, he explained, and it would be several days before visitors would be allowed to see him.

The master of Summit View heard this report with new suspicion against Everton. Warburton had not been weakened by a long illness; he was an honored guest, and they were anxious to do all they could; and the idea of keeping every one of his friends out looked peculiar to Wayne. Everton added fuel to the fire by eulogizing Hugh as a noble fellow, whereas he had always treated him very coolly when the invalid was a well man.

The host decided that there were secrets of the sick-chamber which ought to be explained.

Half an hour passed, and then Everton announced that he was going for a walk. He went, and the other men soon descended to the lower part of the house. Mrs. Wayne stated that Estelle had company in the parlor—who, she did not know—so the detective decided to go home for awhile.

He had left the house and started through the grounds when he was excitedly accosted by Allen Marlowe.

"Do you know who is in the parlor with Estelle?" he fiercely asked.

"Do I? No."

"It is Guerdon Frazer!"

Doubledark showed genuine, though only slight, surprise.

"The scoundrel is there, and has been received as a friend!" Allen hotly added. "Heaven knows I did not mean to act the spy, but I was passing the window and saw him lounging by the piano, near her chair, a cheerful, happy smile on his face."

"Was she smiling?"

"I could not see her face."

"Then curb your jealousy. I don't believe she did smile."

Doubledark looked back as he spoke, and then suddenly drew Allen behind a tree. Frazer was coming from the house.

"He has not seen us!" observed the detective. "Let's keep in cover and observe him. Let's see what he'll do next."

Frazer passed wholly unconscious of their proximity, a quiet smile on his face, but had gone but a few yards further when another man stepped out of the shrubbery and stood squarely in his path.

It was Doctor Everton!

The bronze-faced man necessarily came to a halt, and the two stood looking at each other in silence. It was an ominous pause.

Everton's face was pale and angry, and no one could fail to see that a storm was brewing. Allen and Hugh could not see Frazer's face, but that he maintained his usual airy coolness was shown as he mockingly lifted his hat.

"Bless us and save us!" he cried, "is this really my dear old friend, Georgius Everton? Now I am well pleased, by my faith! The beaming smile on your cherub face—"

"That will do!" sharply, angrily interrupted the doctor. "Let no useless words be spoken here. It is no time for folly."

"Folly!" Upon my word, is my warm affection for you to be thus—"

Everton stretched out one hand imperiously.

"Enough of that! Have you been to yonder house? Answer to the point!"

"I have been there," coolly replied Frazer, "and to see Estelle Wayne. What have you got to do with it?"

"I have this to do with it," returned Everton, his eyes gleaming. "If you ever set foot there again you do it at your peril. *Estelle Wayne is my promised wife!*"

CHAPTER XXXII.

TWO HOT-HEADED YOUNG MEN.

THERE was a start and a deep breath from one of the men behind the tree. Everton's words, spoken with every appearance of sincerity, fell with crushing force upon Allen Marlowe's ears.

But Doubledark, pressing his companion's arm, spoke in a low voice:

"Be calm! What these men say need not affect you or me in the least. Wait patiently!"

Guerdon Frazer had laughed lightly.

"I don't care a fig, Georgius, whether she's your promised wife or not; I don't care if she is Mrs. Everton. I am not a candidate for her hand."

"Then why have you been there?" Everton demanded.

"Excuse me; that is my business!"

"I can easily tell; I know you of old, Frazer. Have you forgotten how I once made you do justice to her? Oh! it was manly, was it not? to make love to a fifteen-year old child, induce her to write love-letters, and then try to use them as a means of compelling her to marry you, so that you could handle Judge Wayne's money. It was fortunate for you that the judge never knew of this; he would have crushed you like the venomous serpent you were!"

"We will talk with him when he gets stronger," Doubledark promised.

"Doctor Everton is up-stairs in his own room, if you wish to see him."

ed Frazer. "It gave you chance to act as her champion."

"True," answered Everton, "I did act as her champion. I compelled you to give up the letters. And you were a candidate for the pulpit!"

Frazer flushed deeply.

"Drop that!" he exclaimed. "I may be low down, but don't remind me— But never mind! You say you forced me to give up the letters. Are you sure I surrendered *all* of them?"

"I suspect that you did not!" sharply returned Everton, "though the suspicion first occurred to me to-day. Man—fiend! have you been there with one of those old letters?"

"I decline to answer."

"You have answered; your evasion speaks for you. Frazer, you are a coward to persecute a woman."

"Thanks!" coolly returned the other.

Everton stamped angrily upon the ground.

"Enough of this; I won't bear it!"

"My dear sir, how are you going to help yourself? You are not my master. If Miss Wayne is your promised wife, talk to her if you want to—not to me."

"I shall talk to you, and I will have an understanding before we part. You scoundrel! do you think I do not understand your game? For weeks you have been blackmailing Miss Wayne, by means of the letters you hold!"

Frazer had changed his position so that Allen could see his face, and could also see that an expression appeared upon it, which seemed to be genuine surprise.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said."

"Why, I have not seen Miss Wayne in five years until yesterday."

"That may be, but what of your agents?"

"I have no agents."

"Nonsense!"

"You're on the wrong track, Everton, this time. I most solemnly declare that I never received one cent from Miss Wayne, and have never approached her, directly or indirectly, during the last five years. If anybody has blackmailed her, I swear that it was not I, in any way, shape, or manner."

Frazer spoke earnestly, and Allen Marlowe was impressed with the belief that he told the truth; but Everton made an angry, impatient gesture.

"I say you have blackmailed her, and by means of the old letters. You have been openly to her to-day to demand money, and from this I judge that you have the letter with you now."

"You do."

"I do."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Frazer's easy air and his patience had vanished.

He was angry, and no longer cared to avoid trouble.

"I demand the letters!" Everton replied.

"Will you take them now, or wait until you can get them?" sneered Frazer.

Blacker grew Dr. Everton's frown.

"Do you refuse to surrender them?"

"Yes."

"Oh, you coward— you scoundrel!"

Frazer smiled scornfully.

"You want to force a quarrel upon me, but it will not work. I decline to quarrel."

"Perhaps you think you lack cause?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll give you cause!"

Doctor Everton hissed the words furiously, and, as he did so, struck out sharply with his open hand. The palm struck Frazer's cheek with a crack audible yards distant.

Another moment and Everton lay prostrate on the ground. Frazer had returned the blow, but not in like manner. His clinched hand had felled the doctor with a tremendous shock.

Marlowe and Doubledark acted on the same impulse and broke from the underbrush. This unbecoming affair must be stopped. They reached the scene just as Doctor Everton arose.

His face was pale, and his serenity was not restored by seeing the sneering smile with which Frazer was regarding him.

The new-comers had expected to see the quarrel renewed as it had begun, but as Everton made no hostile movement, they paused and remained silent.

Everton looked nervously at the man who had struck him down.

"This must be accounted for," he said, busily.

"As soon as you choose," Frazer promptly replied.

"I am no brute, to indulge in a pugilistic encounter, but there is a way for gentlemen to settle their differences. I hereby challenge you to fight me; duel to the death!"

"Happy to oblige you, Doctor Georgius. We will fight, and I hereby name yonder gentleman—Marlowe, I think he is named—as my second. I believe he is the worst enemy next to you that I have here, but all the friend I want is my revolver."

Everton turned abruptly to Doubledark.

"Mr. Brentwood, will you act for me?"

"As far as I am concerned, you'll have to do your killing alone. Dueling is not to my taste."

"Nor mine," Allen added. "I decline to act."

"What's the odds?" easily retorted Frazer. "Seconds are not needed; all we have to do is to pull trigger and shoot to kill."

"Alone be it, then!" Everton agreed.

"Go right ahead, gentlemen," advised Doubledark, dryly. "A slight decrease in the superfluous population of the world is desirable, and we can spare you two better than any one else I know of."

"It is clear that we are among men not to be trusted," Everton observed. "If you will come with me, Frazer, we will arrange details elsewhere."

"Just the checker," Frazer replied, and they walked away toward the west.

"Let 'em go!" Doubledark directed. "I may happen around to see the duel, but we don't aspire to mix with them now."

"Brentwood, did you hear what Everton said?"

"About what?"

"He declared that Estelle was his promised wife!"

"Talk, all talk!"

"What am I to understand by that?"

"I am not in the confidence of either Everton or Miss Wayne, but I will wager something she is not his promised wife."

"Then he merits chastisement for saying so. The scoundrel! I feel sure he is Sirocco, the blackmailer."

"We will let time decide that, and deal with Sirocco, alias Miles Rogerson, alias *Ad infinitum*, when we catch him. As for what Everton just said, I believe the statement was made solely to drive Frazer off; to make him believe that Everton had a right to speak for Miss Wayne, and thereby rid her of the man who has come out of the West like a vulture."

"I wish I could believe it."

"Try!" Doubledark briefly replied. "And now, do you know that Hugh has recovered consciousness?"

"No! Is it possible?"

"Possible and true."

"Thank Heaven for that!" Allen fervently replied.

"No doubt you will be admitted to see him, though the rest of us are barred out. It is possible that when his mind fully resumes its sway, he may give us new light on this subject; hence, the importance of his recovery. Everton forbids all conversation that may excite him, so, of course, you will not put his life in jeopardy by telling of our new discoveries—say that affairs remain unchanged—but if he says anything that may be a clew, remember it."

"I will, and I feel sure he can throw light on the matter. His hurt was not the result of a fall."

Doubledark explained how Hugh inferred that his injury was received, but expressed a doubt that the injured man's mind was wholly clear.

"He may remember more as he gains strength," the detective added.

Allen was anxious to go to his friend, and Doubledark did not delay him. Allen found one of the servants in charge of Warburton, and after receiving a good many cautions, he was admitted to the sick-room.

Warburton lay upon the bed with his head bandaged, and his face seemed paler than ever, but the old smile was on his face as he feebly put out his hand. His pleasure was very easy to perceive, but it was not greater than Marlowe's. The latter, however, controlled himself and acted as quiet as possible.

Not much conversation was possible. Allen knew that Doctor Everton had said as much; and Hugh's whispering utterance confirmed it.

"I am weak, horribly weak, now," he admitted. "I could not stand if I wished to, but all this will soon be past. I'm going to gain rapidly."

"Providence grant it!" Allen exclaimed.

Hugh then spoke of his injury, and gave the same version the others had received from him.

"That is my idea," he added, "though I am not sure on that point. I begin to have some doubts."

"You may have forgotten something," Allen suggested.

"That is what I fear. Everton says my mind is perfectly clear, but I have some doubts, as I said before. Something which I can't grasp keeps coming vaguely to me. I may be able to remember, anon."

He put his hand to his head and made such an evident effort to think clearly that Allen was alarmed. He bade him give the matter no attention, then. Hugh was becoming weary, and as the dinner-bell rung, Allen promised to watch during the night, or a part of it, and then left the room.

Not for some time had he been so cheerful as at that moment. Hugh was on the road to recovery, and there was hope that Estelle would be rid of her enemy, Sirocco.

As he went down-stairs he had view of a scene worthy of more than casual notice.

Judge Wayne and Estelle were sitting on the

piazza. Whatever trouble was upon the girl's mind, she was perfectly calm then: and, standing by her father's chair, she arranged and rearranged his snow-white hair with deft fingers, her face full of love and tender care.

The old judge, tall, straight, broad-shouldered and strong-faced, looked like a Roman senator in point of dignity, and his expression would still have awed a timid person, but those who knew him best looked at him only with pity.

He who had once been a power in the land; who had been a leader of men and a shaper of events; whose eloquence had stirred uncounted thousands—this grand old man was a mental wreck, living in the past and forgetting the events of present days as they came and went.

But Estelle's affection knew no change, except that it grew deeper and more pitiful as he continued to fail. It was her privilege to watch over him, to guard and guide him, and to soothe his last days on earth.

Allen felt that it was impossible to think ill of such a woman, and he resolved that nothing should make him lose faith in her.

Doctor Everton met the rest of the household at the dinner-table. He did not once glance at Allen, but was as calm as ever. Whatever had been done about the duel, he evinced no outward concern.

Marlowe passed the evening with Hugh, and declared that he would add the night as well, but consented to be relieved for one hour or so by Edward Wayne; so he lighted a cigar and strolled out of the house. He mechanically made a circuit of the house, refreshing himself with the fresh air and indulging in pleasant thoughts—something, of late, to him unknown—but the sudden raising of a window caused him to look up, and he saw that it was one of Estelle's private sitting-room.

But the person visible at the window, and looking out—surely that was not Estelle!

No; it was so far to the contrary that Allen stood in dumbfounded surprise, scarce believing that he saw aright.

The person, unless his eyes strangely deceived him, was a man!

This much he had distinguished when the unknown suddenly drew back, window and curtain were lowered, and no more was to be seen.

Once more Marlowe's jealousy usurped the place of calmness, and he stood scowling like a corsair as time glided away, but when five minutes had, perhaps, elapsed, he heard the side-door opened softly and he became on the alert. He saw some one come out, and recognized the man lately seen at the window.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE HANDSOME BOY.

A RAY of light from a lamp inside the house fell upon the unknown, and Allen saw that his face appeared to be that of a mere youth. The absence of a beard, however, might make him look younger than he was. He seemed to be no more than nineteen years old.

It was a handsome face, though, and the fact did not add to the observer's composure.

The unknown did not vouchsafe time for prolonged scrutiny. He stepped briskly away and went down the walk. Some one closed the door behind him, and though Allen was not certain, he believed it to be Emma, Miss Wayne's maid.

Then he looked thoughtfully after the handsome boy. What was he to do in the case? His jealousy had vanished, and he now regarded the stranger as one of Estelle's enemies.

He had been in her sitting-room, and Allen was of the opinion that he was either the "invisible" foe who had done so much damage, or one of that man's agents.

Probably the cowardly worker in the dark was still exacting blackmail.

"Mysteries accumulate! Will they never end?" muttered Marlowe. "I wish I knew more about this fellow!"

His decision was quickly made. He would follow the boy for a time, at least, and see what would come of it.

This resolution made, he lost no time in acting upon it. At first he had no trouble in following. The night was dark, and the path wound around through the grounds in a serpentine way, so that he easily kept near the pursued without betraying himself.

Once clear of Mr. Wayne's property, this was not so easy.

The boy turned to the right, keeping near the river-bluff, and walked away rapidly. Allen followed at the same pace, but now took care not to get near enough to put himself in danger of discovery. The handsome boy, however, did not once look around.

Every moment Allen expected to see him joined by some other man, who was waiting, but no one appeared and the boy did not seem to expect any one.

In this way they drew near the village, and a new idea entered the pursuer's mind. The foremost person was not Gerdon Frazer, but might it not be one of his agents?

This idea impressed Allen forcibly, and he was not surprised when, on reaching the village, the handsome boy turned his steps toward the hotel.

The hour had grown so late that few houses in the place showed lights, but the office of the hotel was one of the exceptions. Allen expected the boy to enter, but he did nothing of the kind.

For the first time his manner became uncertain and cautious. He moderated his pace to the slowest walk possible, and carefully surveyed the hotel.

He walked entirely around, viewing it from every possible point.

"He expects a confederate," thought Allen, "and the confederate does not appear."

Finally the boy came to a standstill at one point and stood gazing up at a certain window on the second floor. It was dark, but that did not seem to influence him.

He made another circuit of the hotel, and then walked away.

Allen had become a good deal puzzled, but he followed once more, determined to see the end of the affair.

His eyes were soon opened.

The boy went to an out-house, and from there drew out a long, light ladder. His movements began to have some method, and as he shouldered and bore the ladder toward the hotel, a part of the mystery vanished. But it only left the rest more complicated.

Plainly, he intended to enter the hotel secretly, but what was his object? And why was he, lately a guest at Summit View, now about to act the burglar at the hotel?

"Mystery, all mystery!" muttered Allen.

The boy planted his ladder under the window he had before looked at so sharply, the upper end resting against the fire escape, which ended at the second floor.

Then he went lightly up.

All his movements had been made with uncommon boldness, despite a certain, superficial air of caution, and Allen one moment suspected that he might be a guest at the hotel who was desirous of returning secretly to his room, and the next moment looked for darker, deadlier motives.

The boy reached the fire-escape and, resting his feet upon the balcony it formed, tried the window. It was not fastened and he raised it easily, his caution, however, revealing the fact that, whatever his business there, he was very anxious to avoid discovery.

Allen remained on the ground and watched.

The boy crawled through the window, lowered both it and the curtain, and then a bright light flashed up in the room, causing Allen more perplexity than ever. If the boy was a burglar, he was either a very bold or a very foolish one.

Perhaps five minutes had passed when the sound of footsteps caused Allen to shelter himself behind an out-house. A man advanced from the north, passed to the front of the hotel and entered.

He had not been unrecognized by the watcher.

"Frazer, and just come from the direction of Wayne's."

Allen frowned thoughtfully, though not jealously. He had no idea that the man with the bronzed face had been to see Estelle; he connected the expedition with the proposed duel, rather.

Frazer passed with lowered head and a thoughtful air, and Allen moved back to where he could easily watch the room to which the boy had gained entrance.

There was no change in the situation.

He went to the front of the hotel and looked into the office. Frazer stood by the desk, chatting with the clerk, but he finally aroused, received his key and walked toward the elevator.

The question occurred to Allen, What if it was in Frazer's room that the handsome boy was operating?

Allen got quickly back to his place of observation. The light still burned and the curtain was still down, but its oscillating movements indicated that the window had again been raised, something of which Allen was not quite sure in the darkness.

Suddenly, however, what seemed to be an angry voice sounded from the room.

Then came a crash, as though a chair had been knocked over.

Another moment and the curtain was dashed aside and the handsome boy appeared. He sprung upon the balcony and began running down the ladder, but had gone only a few steps when Frazer appeared at the window.

Allen grew alarmed as he saw a revolver in the bronze-faced man's hand.

"Hold on!" the latter shouted, addressing the boy. "Stop, or I'll blow your head off!"

The next moment the form of the boy shot through the air. He had made a bold leap, and a skillful one as well. He alighted on his feet, and, in a moment more, was running away.

An angry exclamation burst from Frazer's lips, and he pulled the trigger. The flash and report came, but the handsome boy remained unharmed, and continued his retreat.

Allen Marlowe decided that it was full time for him to do the same thing, for search was sure to be made, and if he was seen near there, Frazer would be glad to connect him with the burglarious boy if he could. He therefore followed promptly after the runaway.

If he had entertained any thoughts of overtaking him he would have been disappointed; the boy fled at a pace which Allen was unable to equal, keeping straight on toward Summit View, and he was soon lost to sight.

There were no signs or sounds of pursuit, and when Wayne's grounds were reached, he relapsed into a walk. Before he reached the house, however, he met Doubledark, and to him he hastened to tell the story.

The detective did not seem surprised.

"I saw her enter the house on her return," he remarked.

"Saw her? Am I right, then, in my vague suspicion that the handsome boy was Kit Kenney?"

"Quite right!"

"I can suspect why she went to Frazer's room."

"So can I. Frazer, after fleeing from Edward Wayne, to-day, to avoid discovery, suddenly determined to make a bold push. He went to see Miss Wayne and, I infer, told her he had still more of those old-time letters. He probably offered them for sale. Do you think he has them now?"

"Not if Kit was able to get them."

"I'll wager a good deal she did get them; it is hard to beat that barbarian girl. I feel sure she has secured the letters and beaten Frazer!"

"He needs to be beaten in another way, and by a man."

"That reminds me! I've learned that he and Everton fight their duel at sunrise. Will you accompany me there?"

"Gladly!" Marlowe replied.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

NICK HAS CAUSE FOR GRIEF.

NIGHT had gone to the death-cave of the past, and another day had opened, but not yet had the sun risen to view.

A single person came along the narrow beach between the bluff and the river, at a point half a mile above Summit View. It was Nick Kenney, and he paused and looked around with a disappointed expression.

"No sign on 'em yet," he muttered. "Hope their courage ain't give out, for 'twould be a pity to have the blow-out broke up. Guess they'll come, though, for there was thunderclouds in their eyes. Nick, my boy, you're coming on fast in the world when two sports choose you as their double-headed second in a duel. Oh, there's fun ahead, sure pop!"

The wayward youth cut a pigeon-wing, and looked around for new signs.

"Not a soul about but me," he added, disconsolately.

In saying this he made one error. Old Doubledark had used his ears to such an extent that he had overheard Everton and Frazer name the hour and place of the proposed duel, and, according to his understanding with Marlowe, the previous night, they had come to observe and listen.

The detective had said that the duel should go on, and Allen did not oppose him.

They were on the spot ahead of Nick, but had taken position among the bushes, where they were not likely to be detected.

"If them chaps should back out," pursued Nick, referring to the duelists, "it would be a mean shame and a blot on the code of honor—but I guess they'll come. Anyhow, I'll mark off the ground where they can stand up and pepper each other. Jerusalal won't it be a proud moment in your life, Nicholas, with you as boss of the whole business!"

He was busy for a while in selecting what he thought proper positions for the duelists, and then his face suddenly brightened. Two men were advancing, one from the north and the other from the south.

They were Doctor Everton and Guerdon Frazer.

"Fun ahead!" cried Nick, rubbing his hands together.

The two men reached the place at nearly the same time, and both nodded stiffly.

"Are you ready?" Everton asked.

"All ready!"

"Revolver and all?"

"All ready!"

"Then there need be no delay."

"Not an atom," Nick agreed, cheerfully. "You'll observe, gents, that I've made two scratches in the sand, the ways apart named by you. All you have to do is to toe the mark and blaze away. All very simple."

"So simple that you need not make any words about it," curtly agreed the doctor. "You have only to do the counting, as agreed upon."

"Strikes me I ain't of much 'count' in the game, anyhow," grumbled Nick, shortly, but still capable of a joke.

The men took their positions without answering. The scratches were near enough to each other, so there was little fear of lead being wasted, and a cool, careless smile hovered on Frazer's face. The last few years of his life had been spent in the Far West, and he was so skillful with the revolver, that he expected to end the duel at one shot.

Nick, alone, was dissatisfied.

His expected importance in the case had been rudely nipped in the bud, but he was to have the honor of counting for them to fire, and that was something.

They took their places with ready revolvers, and Nick began, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

"One!"

The revolvers were raised.

"Two!"

The men took aim.

"STOP!"

It was not Nick's voice, but a feminine one, clear, sharp and decisive. Both revolvers fell, and the duelists looked up in sudden alarm.

They saw Estelle rapidly advancing, followed by Kit Kenney.

A shadow fell upon the dueling party, and Doctor Everton's face turned a dark red. He could face Frazer's revolver, but not Miss Wayne's eyes when engaged in such a cause as this.

She reached the spot, and paused, fixing her gaze first on the doctor.

"For shame!" she cried. "Is this the proper way for an honest man to occupy his time?"

Everton could not answer. His eyes were cast on the ground, and the revolver fell from his trembling hand.

Miss Wayne turned upon Frazer.

"And you—what have you to say?" she cried.

The unabashed rascal lifted his hat with mocking politeness.

"Simply this. You are looking charming this lovely morning, my dear Miss Wayne, and you are as welcome as flowers in May."

An angry flush crossed her face, and she went close to his side.

"I will waste no words with you, sir," she said, with the air of a queen addressing a slave.

"You are not man enough to deserve even censure. One thing I will say, though: your hold over me is broken, and from this moment I defy as much as I despise you."

Frazer shrugged his shoulders with careless indifference.

"I know," he replied. "Yonder girl, your maid, came to my room when I was away last night, and stole the last of those old letters. As you say, my hold is broken. You played a bold game, and I admire you for it. Words would be wasted on our case, for I have given up the battle. I shall return West as soon as dear Doctor George is satisfied."

"You can go at once, for there will be no duel."

"I accept Everton's assertion to that effect, not yours," was the curt reply.

"Was he the challenger?"

"Yes."

Estelle turned to the doctor.

"Tell the wretch that you will not fight," she directed, commandingly.

"Miss Wayne, this man is your bitter enemy," Everton remonstrated. "I am here to give him a lesson."

"By such a barbarous method as dueling?" asked the lady, scornfully.

"Desperate cases require desperate remedies."

"There is no desperate case, as far as I am concerned. Whatever power Guerdon Frazer may have had, it is now gone. For what you have done for me, when I needed aid, I thank you, George Everton; but nothing can excuse you for coming here deliberately to take that man's life. He is a wretch, but you descend to his level by becoming a duelist."

Everton's downcast face flushed.

"I was helping you," he muttered.

"I want no such aid."

"Come, you two," interrupted Frazer, with easy insolence, "don't let us have a lover's quarrel. Pray don't look surprised, Miss Wayne—Doctor Georgius has told me that you are his promised wife!"

Estelle's eyes flashed.

"You speak falsely now!" she declared.

"I swear that Georgius said so!"

"Forgive me—I did it to drive him away!" explained Everton, almost with a groan.

"That way was as uncalled for as your resort to a duel. I have only a few words to say upon the subject—I am not, and never shall be, George Everton's 'promised wife.' Now, let that subject rest. As for this duel, it is a disgrace to both of you. Doctor Everton, tell this infamous man that you will not fight!"

"Your word is my law," the doctor muttered.

"And are you satisfied?" Frazer persisted.

"Yes," was the sulky reply.

"Then I am off, and the boundless West shall know me once more. Dear friends, I leave you with regret! It is not that my plots have failed, but that every throb of my heart is a pulsation of love for both of you. Doctor Georgius, and you, empress of my soul, farewell forever!"

Once more Frazer lifted his hat, smiled sarcastically, turned and stalked away.

Doctor Everton was looking gloomily at Estelle, expecting a severe rebuke, but he received even more cutting and irritating treatment. Without a word to him Estelle turned toward

Kit, and mistress and maid began a prompt retreat from the place.

Allen Marlowe, standing with Old Doubledark in ambush, saw the final act with unbounded pleasure. If he had wanted proof that Estelle did not care for Everton, he could not have asked for more than her disregard of the doctor's presence.

Nick Kenney was the saddest person there, if looks furnished a criterion.

With his hands plunged deep into his pockets, and his cap jammed down on the back of his head, he had been glancing from one to another of the party, as though grievous wrong had been done him. When no one was left but him and Everton, he plaintively asked:

"Say, mister, ain't there going to be a duel?"

"Silence!" angrily replied the doctor. "This affair has ruined me. Miss Wayne despises me!"

"But ain't there to be a duel?"

"Ask that question again and I will throw you into the river!"

"Have you got two revolvers, mister? If so, I will fight you! It's a burning shame to have this picnic busted, and—Hello! he's gone!"

Everton had wheeled and was hurrying away.

"The whole business has gone to the dogs!" added Nick, in utter despair. "When I engage to help any more men shoot themselves, I'll first learn whether they have any backbone, if I have to call in a doctor of anatomy!"

So saying, he, too, beat a retreat, and Allen Marlowe and Old Doubledark had no further need of caution. They came out of their hiding-place in the bushes.

"Well," said the detective, "are you satisfied that you have no rival in Everton?"

"I am more than satisfied!" declared Allen, in high spirits. "I am overjoyed. Frazer's power is gone, and Everton has been snubbed. But, speaking of Frazer, ought he to escape so easily?"

"He has not escaped. I let him go for now, but I was determined that you should see Miss Wayne and Everton alone, and be satisfied that there was no love between them."

"I am convinced, and I owe all to you. With Frazer and Everton beaten, Estelle's future looks bright!"

Old Doubledark started to speak, changed his mind and remained silent. This thought, however, was in his mind:

"The blackmailer still remains!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

SIROCCO'S NEW DEMAND.

WHEN the family met at the breakfast-table Doctor Everton was missing. He sent word that he was indisposed, and kept his room all day, with the exception of two brief visits to Hugh Warburton.

When his message was delivered at the table, Estelle and Allen both understood it; the doctor would not face Miss Wayne. Allen forbore glancing at her, and she believed that no one knew of the events of the morning.

After breakfast Estelle and Allen met in the parlor and had an uninterrupted interview of half an hour's duration. No reference was made by either to the affairs nearest their hearts, and conversation ran on trivial matters, but Marlowe found ground for hope in Estelle's every word and glance. She was like the Estelle of old; her manner was kind and gracious; and hope rose high in the young man's breast.

The clouds seemed to have rolled away, and he believed that when he spoke at the proper time their old relations could be restored.

While they were there Kit Kenny passed the open door. The daughter of the barbarians did not pause to act the spy, but she saw a good deal at one swift glance.

She had learned to love her mistress; she had pitied her in her sorrow; and, sympathizing with her fancy for Marlowe, was rejoiced to see, as she easily did with her quick, woman's eyes, that matters were getting on the old footing.

Kit, however, was destined to receive a shock before the day drew to a close.

That day the young ladies saw but little of the men upon whom they relied for entertainment. Everton, as has been said before, kept his room, and Allen was in attendance on Hugh. The latter stated that he had gained somewhat—and Everton, as a physician, admitted a very slight improvement—but he assumed an invalid's privilege of being national.

He declared that the sight of other attendants was disagreeable, and that he wanted Marlowe with him all day. He told the doctor that he believed he could sleep better at night if left alone, and as Everton did not object, it was decided that regular watchers should be dispensed with, but that Allen should relieve the monotony of his confinement until he was improved.

This, consequently, was Marlowe's occupation through the day, and Hugh's manner well rewarded him. The physical weakness which the injured man showed in every way was painful to Allen, but he was in good spirits and, in his faint voice, declared that he should be able to sit up in a day or two.

Marlowe had begun to feel more kindly toward Everton since the events of the morning, and his watchful care for the patient awakened Allen's gratitude.

After all, he thought, the doctor might not be such a bad fellow.

On the whole, there was more good will than usual among the people of Summit View that day.

Shortly after lunch the mail was brought in and put in its usual place. Kit Kenney was the first to examine it, looking for letters for Estelle. There were three, and the envelope of one gave her a start. She had seen that queer, stiff, cramped writing before, and these thoughts flashed through her mind:

"Miss Wayne ain't got rid of him yet, and it's sure he is bound to make more trouble. I hate to give it to her when she's so happy!"

Kit had recognized the writing of the "invisible" blackmailer on the envelope, and she could imagine what a blow it would be to give her the letter, when she believed that her enemy had been disposed of forever.

The girl hesitated, meditated, and ended by hiding the letter in her own pocket. At that time she had no clear idea of what she would do with it, but she wished to give Estelle a reprieve if nothing more. Later, when the other letters had been given to her mistress, it occurred to her that the one from the blackmailer might not be important or hostile.

The love she had learned to feel for Estelle was strong and true; it was for her sake the girl had carried the revolver which was put to such timely use against Frazer; and, now, it was in no ignoble spirit that Kit decided to read the letter herself before giving it to Estelle.

Having decided, she acted promptly.

By subjecting the envelope to the influence of steam in the kitchen she succeeded in unsealing it without defacing it in any way, and then she slipped out of the house and made her way to the bluff, to read it at her leisure.

And this is what she read:

"Miss WAYNE—I regret to say that I have lost every cent of the money you gave me before. I must have another supply at once. You fought hard before paying me anything before, but circumstances are such now that I *will not* dally with you. I know you received money yesterday, in cash, and you must bring me one thousand dollars to the hollow tree on the bluff at ten o'clock, to-night. I am in no mood for delay, and I am without mercy! Bring the money and you are safe: fail, and the whole world shall know your secret. I swear this! I also swear that if you pay the money I will never again trouble you; I will forever remain invisible."

"Sirocco."

Kit crushed the letter in her nervous hand.

"The coward! The villain!" she hissed. "So he would take all her money! Not content with robbing her before, he wants to rob her again. He commands her to meet him at the bluff, does he? He *shall* be met, but *I will* be the one to meet him! I'll go with my revolver, and woe be to him if he don't swear to leave her forever!"

"Well said, and I'll help you!"

Kit had been standing like a tragedy queen, her dark eyes flashing, but the last recorded words, uttered close to her side, caused her to wheel in sudden alarm.

Her color changed as she saw Mr. Gordon Brentwood.

"I'll help you!" he quietly added.

"Who wants your help?" Kit retorted.

"You need it. It takes a man to deal with a blackmailer, and I fancy I can take care of the writer of that note."

"What do you know about the writer?" demanded Kit, with the loftiest air.

"I know he is the man who has been blackmailing Miss Wayne; who placed you at Summit View; but whom you now hate cordially."

Old Doubledark spoke calmly and persuasively, but Kit was still in a panic. She had unwittingly betrayed a part of her mistress' secret, and what to do she did not know.

"I think you must be crazy!" she deposed.

"Young lady," was the unmoved reply, "I honor you for your devotion to your mistress, but, if I can convince you I am her friend too, will you not trust me?"

"I have no reason to think you her enemy."

"Should you have a doubt of my loyalty, ask Edward Wayne or Allen Marlowe how far I can be trusted. You need not tell them *why* you wish to know; so, ask and say nothing. Kit, I, too, know the trouble Miss Wayne is in; I know about the blackmailer, the exchanged diamonds, and the relentless demands of Sirocco, *alias* Miles Rogerson, *alias* Something else, I dare say."

Kit gazed at the speaker in puzzled uncertainty.

"Now, I have not read the letter you hold," Doubledark continued, "but I think the chance has come to nab Mr. Sirocco. Why can't you and I meet him, in place of Miss Wayne, and polish the rascal off? My word for it, I can compel him to give up his persecution forever!"

The strength of the speaker's character had come to the front; the "student" had given place to the keen man of business.

"You are a detective!" Kit exclaimed.

"I am! More than that, I am the friend of

your mistress, of Edward Wayne and of Marlowe. Now, will you take me as your ally?"

Kit was strongly impressed with the belief that he was to be trusted, and, after a little more persuasion, she put her last doubt aside and gave Doubledark the letter. He read it carefully, and smiled grimly when he had finished.

"We will have our blackmailer in the toils before midnight!" he declared.

"Who is the wretch?" Kit cried.

"Haven't you any idea?"

"No."

"He has kept his secret well, but it will soon be known to both you and me. Girl, are you not a good mimic?"

"How do you know that, sir?"

"I have heard you mimic the servants at the house with great fidelity."

"I can do that," Kit confessed.

"Can you imitate Miss Wayne's voice?"

"I think so, though I never tried."

"Practice, to-day, for our plan is this: When you go to meet Sirocco, put on some of Miss Wayne's outer garments—make your own selection, but have the disguise perfect—then when you meet him, pretend to be your mistress; make him talk and demand money; and at the proper time I will step out and nab him. Understand?"

"I do, sir, and I'll do it!" Kit declared.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THEY GO TO MEET THE BLACKMAILER!

ALLEN MARLOWE remained in attendance on Hugh until evening. He was then relieved by Edward Wayne and, feeling the effects of his day's labor, he went out of the house to get fresh air. Some one had been watching for him, and he was at once joined by Old Doubledark.

"You look pale," observed the detective.

"I am very weary," Allen confessed.

"Do you feel in condition for an adventure, a few hours later?"

"What kind of an adventure?"

"It is the catching of Miles Rogerson!"

"What?"

"At ten o'clock, to-night, I am going to seize Miss Wayne's mysterious blackmailer!"

"Are you in earnest?"

"I am."

"Then, for Heaven's sake, explain what you mean!"

Doubledark did explain, and Allen was soon in possession of all the facts concerning Sirocco's latest letter, the detective's interview with Kit and the plan to catch the secret foe.

"Does Kit know who he is?" Allen asked, eagerly.

"No; nor does Estelle know."

"Does—does Kit know the nature of the secret by which the wretch has been able to collect blackmail?"

"No; and she is no worse off than I am. All my search, and all my reasoning, have failed to give me the least clew to the secret."

"Are you sure it does not concern Frazer?"

"Frazer and his letters are out of the case and were never in it. He was only a passing incident, as I may say. He came from the West with two letters remaining out of the lot which Everton forced him to give up, years ago, at the parsonage. Of these two you found one, and Kit stole the other from his room. Frazer did demand money from Miss Wayne, but he is not our 'invisible' blackmailer."

"What else can there be in Estelle's life to cause her to submit to blackmail?"

"I confess that I don't know."

For some time longer the men conversed, and it may easily be imagined that Allen did not refuse to aid in capturing Sirocco. He was eager to participate in the work, and all preliminaries were duly arranged.

Afterward, Marlowe returned to the house and joined the family in the parlor. According to Doubledark's orders Kit had kept back the letter, and Estelle, ignorant of its arrival, was in good spirits.

Judge Wayne was present, and appeared to have caught a measure of her lightness. As usual, his mind wandered on the past, and he told several humorous stories of his professional career. His long connection with public life, political and legal, and his education and intelligence, combined, had made him a rarely good talker, and even in the days of his mental weakness he could interest the hearer—as long as he did not try to talk of the present time.

This danger he realized, and avoided with considerable skill, and when he did happen to get near the rocks, Estelle was at hand to guide him away like a skilful pilot. What Allen had seen before he saw again that evening, and as he marked her devotion to the infirm old man, he felt that, though a score of mysteries stood in the way, he would not, could not, think evil of her.

There was a disposition on the part of all to retire early that evening, and Allen helped on the inclination; but when he bade the others good-night, he did not go to his room.

He left the house and joined Old Doubledark at the appointed place.

Kit was not there, nor was she to meet them.

The detective had realized that discovery must in all ways be guarded against, and Kit, having received full directions, was not to see them again until the final scene took place.

Doubledark conducted Allen to the bluff.

The hollow tree mentioned by Sirocco was easily distinguished, and the surrounding underbrush furnished ample room for concealment. The detective had visited the spot before, and he proceeded to secrete Allen and himself where only the sharpest search would discover them.

Then the period of waiting began. They were ahead of time, and Sirocco and Kit were not to be expected at once.

Never before had Allen been so nervous. He could hear his heart thumping like the tap of a drum, and all his nerves seemed a quiver. At times it seemed next to impossible to lie still, but Doubledark had given strict orders that he should not move a hand, or speak, and he had to endure it.

At last there was a sound of footsteps and a female form came quickly forward. Allen could almost have sworn that it was Estelle, but he remembered that Kit had been directed to wear her mistress's garments, and he gave her credit for unusual skill in disguising herself.

She wore a veil, and in the darkness it was out of the question to settle the matter positively.

She came to the hollow tree and stood looking around. Her manner was quiet, but the biding men, who remembered how she had once used her revolver upon Frazer, noticed that she kept one hand under the light shawl she wore, and they drew their own conclusions.

When the daughter of the barbarians fired at Frazer she had only wished to frighten him, but she was, really, an excellent shot, and Sirocco would not fare so well, perhaps, if she saw fit to turn the revolver upon him.

Again footsteps sounded, and a man came forward with a bold, free step.

Allen strained his eyes and looked eagerly.

All hope of recognizing the man in the darkness was at once dissipated. He wore a slouch-hat which was jammed well down upon his head, and, despite the time of year, a muffler came up and met it, while a rough coat hid all the true lines of his form.

He spoke, and his voice was hoarse and unnatural. That, too, was plainly disguised, and the watchful trio understood that he was resolved to prevent all possibility of recognition.

"So you have come?" he began.

"Yes, I am here."

Allen started. He could hardly believe that it was not Estelle's voice, but he remembered what Doubledark had said about Kit's powers of imitation.

"I thought you would come," added the man.

"You had no right to think that!"

"Why not?"

"You have exacted of me more than human endurance can well bear."

"Nevertheless, you have come."

"I have."

"Well, Miss Wayne, I am your friend, Sirocco. I state this because you may not recognize me, not being well acquainted with my face."

"I know your ways too well."

"I am a man of business, and I must have money, you know!" declared the blackmailer, hoarsely.

"Have I not given you enough? Did I not sacrifice my jewels for you?"

"You gave me the money got by selling your diamonds, and if I had not been in infernal hard luck, I should not have needed more; but, as I told you in my letter, I lost every cent of what I gave you."

"Where did you lose it?"

"Never mind; that is not to the point. What I am here for now is—more money. This time you are able to pay me in hard cash, as I well know. Have you brought the one thousand dollars?"

"Sir, it is infamous to ask this of me!"

"From your point of view, perhaps. From mine, I find myself compelled to get a living."

"By preying upon women?"

"Any way I can."

"You choose an honorable way!"

"Be not sarcastic, Miss Wayne; you and I need not be foes any longer. I swear to you that when this sum is paid you shall never again hear from Sirocco."

"Suppose I refuse to pay it?"

"You dare not?"

"Dare not!"

"That is it exactly. The secret which I hold is one you would prevent from reaching the world if you had to pay the last penny of your fortune. The disgrace of it would carry death in its train. Think of that!"

"Is there no way to move you to pity?"

"None!"

"And you demand another thousand dollars?"

"I do demand it, Estelle Wayne!" declared the blackmailer, as hoarsely as ever. "I will have it, or I will disgrace you beyond redemption!"

There was a sudden stir in the bushes. Old

Doubledark had touched Allen Marlowe's arm, and together they sprung from cover. The blackmailer could not have been more completely in the trap, and the first sound had barely reached his ears when the detective's arms closed around him. At last Sirocco was visible, if not known!

CHAPTER XXXVII. THE BITTER TRUTH.

The blackmailer bounded like a snared lion. He realized at once that he was trapped, and his efforts to escape were almost superhuman. Every effort was put out in the desperate struggle which ensued.

Doubledark was a man of remarkable strength, and Allen no mean adversary, but it was a long while before they subdued their man. Madly he resisted, trying by every possible artifice of strength and cunning to break away, but there could be only one end to the fight.

At last there was a sharp click as the detective ironed the blackmailer's hands behind his back, and he suddenly became passive.

He knew then that hope was gone, and he resisted no longer.

"He gave us a hard pull?" Doubledark confessed.

"Now to see his face!" cried Allen. He tore away the hat and the muffler, which, being well secured, had not given way, while, at the same moment, the detective turned the light of a dark-lantern full upon his face.

The secret plotter was revealed. Allen Marlowe looked, and then he uttered a hoarse cry and reeled back against the tree, faint, dizzy, startled and dumfounded.

He had recognized the prisoner, and it was the severest blow of his life. The blackmailer was—*Hugh Warburton!*

"The wicked shall prosper only for a season!" uttered Doubledark, gravely.

The prisoner was looking at Allen. Kit, too, had recognized "Sirocco," and, in her amazement, had thrown up her veil, but Hugh saw only Marlowe. There was an expression on the trapped man's face which was compassionate and, almost, pitiful. Looking still at Allen he spoke six words:

"I would have spared you this!"

"Did you spare Miss Estelle?" cried Kit, bitterly.

Hugh turned to Doubledark.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The detective exposed his badge.

"Take me away," pursued Warburton. "I have no more to say."

Allen started into sudden life, though his pallid face might well have been that of a dead man.

"No, no!" he cried; "not in this way. Tell me you are innocent! I am weak and dazed, but I will not believe evil of you!"

"Did you hear me demand money just now?"

"Yes."

"I have no more to say. Officer, take me away!"

Doubledark laid his hand gently upon Allen's arm.

"I tried to prepare you for this as we came here, to-night, by saying that you would see the face of a friend in Miles' Rogerson, alias Sirocco; but you did not sufficiently prepare yourself. I did not think the blow would fall so heavily, but I knew that only absolute proof could convince you of his guilt."

"But he was sick abed—"

"All a trick. Go back to the house, Marlowe! I am going to take Rogerson to the village, but I will see you in the morning."

"In the morning!" That time found Allen Marlowe weary, ill, confused and wretched, and he did not leave his room, and would see no one until Doubledark called. At ten o'clock the detective came in gravely. Without the empty show of a regular greeting, he placed a folded paper in Allen's hand.

"Read!" he said, briefly, and then retired to a seat by the window.

He had passed over a manuscript, and the following is what the young man read:

ALLEN MARLOWE:
"You know, at last, that I am a villain. I knew it long ago. I was a wild and wayward boy; I grew up indolent and inclined to get my living in the easiest way possible. I followed my inclinations, and have indulged in about all kinds of rascality which a man may do and still pass as a gentleman among those who know not of his misdemeanors.

"For two years I have been a professional blackmailer. You have no idea what a large number of persons, male and female, make this a regular business in great, gay New York. How others succeed I don't know; I did well at it.

"Some weeks ago I became possessed of facts which warranted me to try and extort money from Miss Estelle Wayne. What these facts were I leave her to tell, but I solemnly declare that the secret is not hers, *directly*, in any way, shape or form. It affects Judge Wayne, and it gives me a stronger hold over her than I could possibly have gained in any other way. You know how she loves him. Knowing that in his present mental condition any shock would prove fatal to him, she submitted to blackmail.

"This is the whole head and front of the mystery which has so perplexed you.

"My plot was well under way when I received

your letter inviting me to Summit View. I was dumfounded to learn that I had been trying to blackmail your promised wife; I had not before known that you even knew her.

"Here let me pause and say that, however great a villain I am, my friendship for you has been sincere. I always hid my iniquity from you, and wished you to think well of me. Before this wretched affair I never did you a wrong, and never intended to. I hope you will believe that I was as much your friend as my dwarfed nature would allow me to be.

"When I received your letter my first impulse was to give up my plot, for your sake, but your invitation gave me such an advantage, by placing me on the very ground, that I resolved to continue until I had extorted a large sum of money from Miss Wayne.

"I hoped to escape detection, and then continue as your good friend, and hers, to the end of time,

"I went to Summit View, and was long unsuspected. I carried along several disguises, hiding them in a fissure in the bluff. These I used when necessary, but, in dealing with Estelle, I made use of other men a good deal-tools that I picked up when and where I could.

"Now to explain a few individual cases of mystery:

"First: You remember how you were struck down in the billiard-room after reading a manuscript I gave you. The interview between Miss Wayne and Everton, described therein, was a lie from whole cloth made up by me because I wanted your suspicions to rest for awhile on Everton. The letter from Miss Wayne, inclosed with the manuscript, which you began to read but did not have a chance to finish, was genuine; but it was written, not to the doctor, but to the 'invisible' man—to me.

"I wanted to cement your suspicions on Everton, so I let you read a part of it. Had you read all I should have failed to accomplish my end, so I—villain that I was—I watched and, at the right moment, struck you senseless. Yes; it was I who gave you the blow in the billiard-room.

"Secondly: The bruise on Everton's hand, and his strange manner in the parlor that night, may be accounted for easily. He loved Miss Wayne, was in despair because she did not care for him, and, on that occasion, had been drinking heavily. He received the bruise by falling—not by striking you, as you thought—and dared not remain in the parlor with such an odor of whisky about him. Liquor accounts for his manner then, and the fact that he mistook Shakespeare for a medical book.

"Thirdly: The captured burglar was sent there by me to get Miss Wayne's jewels; I had become impatient. When he was once in limbo I aided to secure him because I knew he could not get away anyhow; because he did not know me by sight; and because I felt sure Estelle would surmise the facts and not dare to have him held. The sequel proved I was right.

"Ever on's manner on that night, and on other occasions, while it seemed so suspicious to you, may be explained in few words. He was invited to Summit View by Miss Wayne, not because she cared for him, but because she knew one of the Raynor girls *dis*. Unluckily, Everton saw fit to fall in love with Estelle, and it was partly his moody jealous nature, partly your own jealousy, and partly a combination of circumstances which made him seem so suspicious. I know no harm of him.

"Fourthly: Doubledark's surmises in the diamond case were all correct, and I need refer to that no further than to say that I used various arts, then, and told several lies, to perplex you. Of course the way of exchanging the diamonds was of my planning.

"Fifthly: The Guerdon Frazer matter is, I believe, known to you in exact accordance with the facts.

"Sixthly: Here I come to my downfall. When I had received the money obtained by Miss Wayne for her diamonds I was ready to abandon my villainy, as far as she was concerned, forever. I went to the cliff to get and destroy the disguises which I had concealed in the fissure, but in climbing up, I slipped and fell heavily to the ground, stunning me.

"When I recovered consciousness I was in bed at Summit View, with a servant for a watcher. My mind was very clear; I realized the situation and, first of all, thought of my money. I saw my vest, in which the money had been, near at hand, and, without arousing my watcher, who had fallen asleep. I reached for it. The pocket was torn badly and the money gone!

"I suspected that I had lost it at the bluff, but an alarming idea occurred to me. If it had been found, would it not awaken suspicion? I had just received a certain sum of money from Estelle, perhaps in bank-notes of which she had taken the numbers. I was alarmed, and I began to plot at once.

"Two things now impressed me. On my table I saw a vial half-full of white pellets, and labeled 'Morphine!' At the sleeping servant's elbow I saw a glass partially filled with liquor. I knew the man—knew him to be a sly toper—and planned accordingly. Softly as a ghost I arose, dropped three of the pellets into his liquor; then returned to my bed.

"This done, I made a sound to arouse him. He stirred; looked at me; saw me lying with closed eyes; drained his glass of liquor and fell asleep again. I waited half an hour; then I arose and shook him. He did not stir; he was in a drugged sleep.

"Quickly I dressed and, taking a small lantern I knew where to find, went to the bluff. I searched long and carefully, but not a sign could I find of my ill-gotten money. I knew then that some one had found it. Back to the house I went, bound to brave it out. If the money had not been found by any one at Summit View, or if suspicion had not been started against me, I was determined to demand more of Miss Wayne. If she had been thus put on the track, I was safer from arrest lying in bed, and supposed to be unconscious, than anywhere else.

"I went to bed and, from that time on, feigned unconsciousness until I saw fit to recover, just as I feigned bodily weakness after my senses were supposed to return. Really, my hurt was slight and I was none the worse for it.

"While lying there I watched and studied every one with whom I came in contact, and I could see

no sign of suspicion. There was none save in the mind of one person who was too villainously sharp for earthly use. I refer to the accursed detective, whom, as Brentwood, I had never considered worth a thought from beginning to end.

"Having decided that I was safe I waited until my drunken servant-watcher was on guard again. He slept at his post, and I secretly wrote the letter to Miss Wayne—the lost Sirocco letter. It was not hard to get it mailed. I put it in a second envelope, addressed it to another 'crook' and bidding him mail and return the real letter, went to the Wayne letter-bag, while my tipsy watcher still slept—though he was never tipsy, really, when on duty—and dropped it into the bag for mailing. It was in disguised writing; it went its way unsuspected; and my friend sent back the letter to Miss Wayne. How it worked you already know.

"I know how it worked, to my sorrow. I now find myself in felon's quarters, and I see Sing Sing looming up before me.

"My story is told. I request you not to call on me, for my conscience pricks me enough, already, but one word let me add: I have regarded you highly, and have been guilty of but one disloyalty to you. When I am in prison I hope you will be enjoying happiness. Go to Estelle Wayne and ask the nature of her secret. I believe her to be a fine, blameless woman, and I hope you will marry her and be happy. You who have done me more honor with your noble friendship than I deserved, farewell!

"HUGH WARBURTON."

The manuscript fluttered from Marlowe's hands, and Old Doubledark arose and approached him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE FINAL EXPLANATION.

"The truth is known, at last," observed the detective, regarding Marlowe compassionately.

"Yes."

"I hope time will lighten the blow."

"Have no fear," Allen replied. "I was hit hard, for I regarded Hugh as an honorable man and the best of friends, but do you suppose I shall grieve long when I know that he was the man who so persecuted Estelle Wayne? No! I passed a miserable night, but the battle is over. We have his own confession; we will judge him by his own words."

"Well spoken, young man!"

"And now," added Marlowe, "tell me about your share in this matter; I am all curiosity. When did you first suspect him?"

"Not early in the game, for circumstances led me astray. Information which I received led me to believe that the blackmailer became an inmate of this house some time before Warburton came here openly. This led me to leave him out of consideration for awhile, put me on the wrong track, and kept me from looking to him critically. This information I now know to have been incorrect.

"I first suspected Warburton after the affair of the diamonds. Observation and study satisfied me that Kit had taken the jewels to New York and had them replaced with imitations, but, on the heels of this, came Hugh's declaration to you that he was positive that he saw Estelle wearing them here at Summit View while Kit was gone.

"He has told me that he made that assertion on the impulse of the moment, to perplex you still further, and regretted it the moment he had spoken.

"That speech started my suspicions against him. He might have been merely mistaken, but he had said he was sure that he saw the diamonds. Now, I was seeking everywhere for some one to suspect, and my professional life has led me to believe that no person is too high and respectable, outwardly, to be free from suspicion.

"Next came Hugh's fall from the cliff, and I found food for thought in that. Feeling sure that he had received the injury by falling while trying to climb the cliff, I asked myself: Why had he wished to climb it? This question was so fruitful that it led me to go there and essay the climb, myself.

"I was well rewarded; I found two things of interest. In a prominent place, half-way up the cliff, I found the roll of money which he lost, as mentioned in his manuscript here; and, near it, carefully concealed, were several disguises. Some of these I had heard of before as having been worn by our blackmailer.

"My next discovery was that Nick Kenney had a revolver. I promptly recognized it as the one found and lost in the billiard-room. I asked Nick where he got it; he explained that Hugh had thrown it in the river, early one morning, but, having observed this secretly, the boy went into the water after it, and got it.

"By Hugh's confession I now know he wounded the man Bent with the self-same revolver, and it was he who stole it from the chair in the billiard-room while Edward Wayne was talking with Doctor Everton. Warburton crept in quietly and secured the tell-tale weapon undiscovered.

"The telegram I expected from my detective friend in New York may be mentioned here, although, as it did not come until ten o'clock last night, you will see that it did no good. It read as follows: 'Man who bargained for exchange of diamonds was Hugh Warburton. Not now to be found. Cannot learn that he is crooked, but seems to have no regular work. Give further

directions, if desired.' As this telegram came late, we will drop it.

"Having found the disguises, the roll of money and the revolver, I knew that Miles Rogerson, Sirocco and Hugh Warburton were one and the same person, and, hoping to hear him mutter, I managed to be his attendant, now and then, in his sick-room. He did not mutter, but I soon decided what Everton did not suspect—that our 'unconscious' man was shamming insensibility.

"When the last letter from 'Sirocco' came, I was not deceived by the fact that Hugh was, according to all accounts, too weak to even sit up in bed. I expected to see him at the bluff, and I was resolved that you should hear his own lips condemn him. You know the result."

"I do, Doubledark," Allen replied, "and I thank you earnestly for unraveling the mystery and freeing Estelle from her enemy. You have done good work, too, and well proved your right to be called 'Doubledark!'"

"It was a peculiar case," the detective admitted, "and bad to be handled carefully. Precipitation would have ruined all. This, however, is not to the point. I have a note for you."

He handed it over. There was one line only, but it was in Estelle's writing, with her name at the end.

"Will you come to my sitting-room?"

Would he come? He sprung to his feet, and Old Doubledark smiled dryly.

"I will excuse you," he observed.

Allen went without delay. That interview need not be described at length, but there was an explanation of mysteries, and before it ended, the engagement between the young couple was formally and gladly renewed. Estelle, too, told plainly what the secret was which had enabled "Sirocco" to blackmail her.

"He said," she explained, "that my father, when in political life, deliberately plotted to beggar and ruin a rival, in order to get the better of him, and succeeded so well, that he drove the poor man to suicide and his wife to an insane asylum. There were facts which made this charge look reasonable, but I know it was unfounded. I have had a detective: a man named Dunton, by the way: on the trail of that old case, and only yesterday I had a letter from him in which he said that, within a week, he would put in my hands positive proof that my father was in no way, shape or manner guilty of the charge."

"And this is the secret you have guarded so carefully?"

"Yes. Remember what Judge Wayne has been, and what he is now. In his present state, the shock of such a story, if made public, would have killed him—and I loved his good name, too, more than I can tell."

"You have proved yourself the noblest of women!" Allen declared warmly.

"I am glad you don't blame me."

"I do not, but, Estelle—I would gladly have helped you in your battle."

"I know it, but I was sensitively anxious to hide it from *all*, and when the blackmailer—who seemed to fear I would seek your help—commanded me to break our engagement, I did so because I dared not trust myself with you under the old circumstances; I should surely have betrayed my secret in an unguarded moment."

"And your troubles are now all past?"

"They are, thank Heaven! Allen, do you remember that evening at the window?"

"I do, indeed."

"I had then paid 'Sirocco' his money, and, thinking myself free from future trouble, was about to ask your forgiveness for my unjust treatment of you, when Guerdon Frazer appeared. I at once suspected that a new trouble menaced me, and it was so, but that, too, is past. I should have asked your help to defeat Frazer; but Uncle Edward had already told me he knew of the blackmailer, vaguely; and I thought that if any one became suspicious of Frazer, I was willing he should be thought the blackmailer, and thus preserve my greater secret."

The curtain falls, but not on one scene alone. It falls upon Hugh Warburton, sentenced to prison for several years, but not for his crime at Summit View. Judge Wayne having been fully exonerated, it was Estelle's desire to drop the matter forever; so another blackmailing scheme was traced to Hugh, and he was tried for that, alone. And so disappeared Miles Rogerson.

Doubledark had an eye to Frazer, but Estelle would not prosecute, and he was allowed to return to the West.

Doctor Everton promptly left Summit View and began the practice of medicine in a remote town. No harm was known of him, and his rudeness to Estelle in the Ghost's Walk was easily explained. He asked her to marry him, was rejected, lost his temper and behaved disagreeably, and when he became penitent, was forgiven by her.

Kit and Emma were both retained by Estelle in her service, and no one could be more faithful.

Nick had the offer of aid, whereupon he de-

clared that the height of his ambition was to be an engineer on the Lightning Express train; and with Allen's help he was put in the way of gradually achieving that glory.

Judge Wayne lived only a short time, but he died with an unsullied reputation; and only Edward Wayne, Estelle, Allen and Doubledark ever knew how near he had come to being falsely accused before the world.

It need scarcely be said that Estelle became Mrs. Allen Marlowe, but it would hardly be proper to omit mentioning that the friends who visit that house declare that nowhere else are they so perfectly entertained; and that, in their opinion, no happier home exists than that of the Marlowes.

Old Doubledark remained in harness, and whenever he had a case, he conducted it with patience, skill and shrewdness which makes his sobriquet still appropriate. Let evil-doers be as cunning as they may, his methods of working against them are doubly dark and wily, as they find to their cost.

THE END.

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